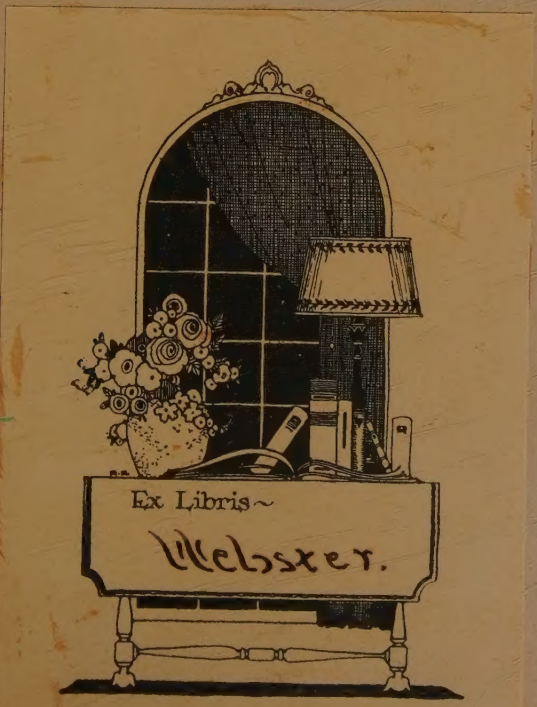
THE SHELDON SIX

ANNE

GRACE M. REMICK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SHE HESITATED AN INSTANT

THE SHELDON SIX
ANNE

BY

GRACE M. REMICK

Author of

"The Glenloch Girls" series, etc.

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PHILADELPHIA

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The Sheldon Six

Introduction

THIS is the book of Anne Sheldon, who loved school and thought life was spoiled when she had to give it up for a while. She was shy, did not care for other girls, and had never joined in outdoor sports, so it took real grit on her own part, and the help of several friendly persons, to shake her out of this unsocial state of mind.

In Anne's family were her father, whom his six children thought the best Daddy in the world; Ellis, an older brother; Rose, next younger than Anne, and much inclined to have all the fun she could and to avoid work and troubles; Connie, a friendly soul, who, according to Rose, had too much imagination; and the kiddies, Jim and Susan.

Anne's father called his family the Sheldon Six, and appointed himself chauffeur of this imaginary family car. He suggested that Anne should be the steering-gear, and, though it seemed to her impossible that she could steer anyone, she promised to try.

The next book in this series, The Sheldon Six—Rose, is the story of a long summer in the country when Rose had to learn to play fair.

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The Sheldon Six

CHAPTER I

ANNE

ANNE stepped off the car at the corner and hurried toward home with her head down. She was afraid the neighbors would be out on their porches in the warm October sunshine, and that she might have to stop and speak. As she passed the house next her own she could almost feel the keen eyes of Mrs. Parkes upon her, and her head throbbed harder at the involuntary quickening of her pace.

"Anyone might think I was a burglar," she said to herself with a laugh that was half a sob, as she closed the front door softly. In the kitchen Effie was singing " Brighten the Corner," with an occasional thump of her iron for emphasis, and through the open window at the end of the hall she could hear Susan's shrill voice and Jim's slower utterance. She remembered with a feeling of thankful-

ness that Rose had said she and Ellis were going to play tennis, and Connie was sure to be off somewhere.

Ever since her father had put her on the car in the city, Anne had been thinking that if she could only get home and cry she should feel better, but now that she was actually here, and the couch with its soft cushions invited her, not a tear would come. Instead, after she had dropped her hat on the bed, she walked over to the mirror and pushed her straggling hair away from her hot forehead with fingers that trembled. The sight of her pale face was not reassuring. "Red hair makes anyone look paler," she muttered stubbornly. "That doctor doesn't know what he's talking about. I'm sure it's my eyes, and I'd be willing to wear spectacles if he'd only let me go to school."

But that was what she had told the doctor, and he had not relented in the least. At the memory of this tears filled her eyes, and she buried her face in the couch cushions and felt herself the most wretched person in the world. Father believed every word the doctor said, because they had been in college together; but even doctors make mistakes sometimes. And she didn't mind being thin and having headaches if only she could keep up with her class. It flashed into her mind that she should have to give up being class editor of the school

paper. "They'll never ask me again," she moaned. "And I should love it so." Her head throbbed wildly as she lay with her face in the hot cushions, and she wished that Aunt Lucia were there to take care of her.

After awhile the front door banged, and someone came running up the stairs whistling.

"Hello!" said the newcomer, rushing into the room and across it without stopping. "When did you get home?"

Anne did not move nor answer. She knew without looking that it was Rose, and that she would talk on without need of response.

"Where under the sun did you put that workbasket Aunt Lucia left for us?" Rose demanded, pulling out bureau drawers in great haste, and resuming her interrupted whistling. "Oh, for goodness' sake, Nan, don't be grouchy. I've torn my skirt so that I can't play in it, and they're waiting for me. Oh, dear, I don't see why Aunt Lucia wanted to get married. I think it was much nicer for her to take care of us."

"It's on the shelf under the table," murmured Anne, holding on to her head with both hands.

"Oh! Blind old bat! I can't see anything when it's right before my eyes." There was silence for a moment while Rose collected needle, thread, scissors and thimble. Then with her foot she

bumped a chair across the room and sat down near the couch.

"Fiddle! I've got to hunt another needle. I couldn't thread this one in a million years." The next instant she was out of her chair, dropping scissors and spool with a clatter that made her sister groan softly.

"What's the matter? Headache?" Rose inquired, in the tone of one who has no physical afflictions of her own, and feels bored by those of others. "If you'd just get out on the tennis court instead of staying in this stuffy room ——"

"Every window in this room is open, and I've only been here a little while anyway," interrupted Anne, clutching her head again as the effort of speaking made it throb more wildly.

"Oh, I remember now. Daddy took you to the doctor, didn't he? Did he say you'd have to wear spectacles, and is that why you're in the doleful dumps?" Rose hitched in her chair in order to bring her skirt within range of her needle, and again dropped the scissors with a clash.

"Excuse," she apologized cheerfully, and then with an effort to be consoling, "probably you won't mind wearing specs when you get used to them. Lots of the girls do."

"It isn't my eyes," Anne said dismally; "it's because I'm not strong and I've studied and read too

much. I've got to stay out of school until—until the doctor says I may go back again." Her voice broke at the last words, and she felt around furtively for her handkerchief. This younger sister of hers never cried and found it difficult to excuse a girl who did.

"Glory! And you're weeping briny tears because you can't go to school. I only wish I had your chance." Rose stopped making large, irregular stitches and stared speculatively at the limp figure on the couch. "That is, I shouldn't want it if I had to feel and—and look the way you do," she added with unnecessary frankness, after a moment of meditation. "There," she went on, gazing at her sewing, "that isn't beautiful, but it'll have to do. Aunt Lucia's hair would stand straight up if she could see those stitches. Well, I'm off again." She hesitated an instant, looking at her prostrate sister, then started for the hall. At the door, however, she stopped. "I suppose there isn't anything I can do to make your head better," she said uneasily, and quite as if she hoped the answer would not curtail her liberty in any way.

"No-o." Anne's shoulders twitched forlornly. "It aches dreadfully, though."

Rose took another irresolute step and stopped again. She remembered perfectly that Aunt Lucia put hot water on Anne's head and darkened win-

dows. The next minute she was reaching hastily for the nearest shade, and she pulled it down with a rattle, stumbling against the end of the couch as she did so. "I knew I should only make you worse if I tried to do anything," she said, feeling as if this excused her from further service. "If I see Connie I'll tell her. She likes all this nurse business." Then she tiptoed along the hall, forgot her caution and ran downstairs, but remembered in time to close the door softly.

A few minutes later Anne raised herself on one elbow, turned the hot cushion and settled down again with closed eyes. She tried to keep from thinking, but a constant succession of pictures passed before her mental vision: her father, standing before the doctor's house this afternoon, and looking anxiously after her as the car bore her away; Aunt Lucia in the shining white of her wedding gown; Aunt Lucia again, going away in the carriage, and looking back with tears in her eyes at these nieces and nephews with whom she had lived since their mother died.

"It seems a hundred years since she went away," Anne said to herself with a quivering lip, "and it was only three days ago." Three days! She could hardly believe it. And next week the new housekeeper, a perfect stranger, would come to manage their affairs. With this thought came an

added throb of pain, and an involuntary moan brought quick response from someone coming along the hall.

"Oh, Honey, is it as bad as that? Just let Connie get at it. She'll drive the horrid pain away."

It was so perfectly an imitation of Aunt Lucia's soothing manner that Anne felt vaguely comforted when two firm hands were pressed on the aching head.

"Now relax," murmured Connie softly, running her hands down the back of her sister's neck and then going creepily over her forehead with the lightest of finger-tips. She said the word relax the way Aunt Lucia used to say it, with her voice going up and down and trailing off softly at the end, and from force of habit Anne stopped clenching her hands and screwing up her face.

"Be just as still as you can, and I'll get some hot water." Connie was large and tall for her eleven years, but she moved so lightly that her sister could scarcely hear her. She had a passion for taking care of people, and it was seldom that she got so good a chance as this.

She was gone a surprisingly short time, but in it she had managed to put on an apron and to pin a white bow on her hair and a white band around her arm. Connie, whose imagination was one of

her chief charms, believed in dressing the part whenever she could.

She set the basin of hot water on a chair by the couch and went softly to lower the shades. "I s'pose I should have done that before I got the water, but, anyway, it's 'most too hot to use," she murmured in apology. "I told Effie you had the headache, and she says you needn't bother 'bout the children. They're in the kitchen now, and she'll give them their supper when it's time."

"I haven't got used to remembering that anyone will expect me to bother about them," Anne sighed. "I can't realize that Aunt Lucia isn't here to take care of everybody. Anyway, I've got troubles of my own."

"Don't think about 'em now," said her nurse, putting on the first hot compress and thereby closing her sister's worried eyes. "You're going to sleep—you're going to forget all the horrid old pain. You're going—to be—all right." She was talking in a soft monotonous voice which was again an imitation of Aunt Lucia's, and presently she began what she called "making pictures."

Anne, relieved before long, heard with dull ears about foam-tipped waves curling in on the beach, and glittering sand that looked like gold; about fleecy clouds that marched in a procession of strange animals against a blue, blue sky. Connie half-

chanted a description of these marvellous beasts, and enjoyed herself hugely.

The last thing Anne's drowsy mind sensed was a rapt recital concerning a prince, a fairy prince, who sat at a safe distance from the crested waves and turned the sand all about him into gold—truly gold that would buy bread and clothes and—Connie's voice died away into silence, and she sat very still for a while. Then she went off to warn everyone to be quiet.

Sometime later Anne awoke in the darkened room with the feeling that she must have slept for hours. She moved her head cautiously and sighed with relief at finding the pain gone. Then she got up, found it was only five o'clock, and languidly did over her heavy braid of hair and washed her face.

As she went downstairs she could hear voices in the dining-room: small Susan's gurgling laugh, and Jim's imperious demand for more honey on his bread. Then Effie spoke, and Connie answered, and some one else laughed.

At the sound of the laugh Anne went quickly into the living-room and curled up on the couch behind the door. That was Mrs. Parkes' voice, she told herself in sudden panic. She was always running in to see what they were doing and to tell them how to manage their affairs, and since Aunt Lucia went

away she had felt it her duty to be more neighborly than ever.

Anne's retreat had been just in time, for almost immediately Mrs. Parkes came into the hall. "They're happy—poor little things," she was saying. "They don't realize what a loss their Aunt Lucia is to them."

Effie mumbled something in reply and closed the dining-room door.

"It's going to be quite a change to have a strange woman here as housekeeper. I only hope she'll be good to them," Mrs. Parkes went on, with all sorts of unpleasant possibilities in her tone. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Parkes and I don't see how Mr. Sheldon can afford it. Everything's going up so—except salaries."

She laughed again—the high-pitched laugh which came so frequently and held so little real mirth—and Anne sank deeper into the cushions and stuck her fingers in her ears only to take them out again the next instant.

"Not one of those children has the least idea of how money goes," the sharp voice went on. "They're all selfish and pretty much spoiled. I daresay that even Anne thinks shoes and stockings for six children can be picked off bushes—if she ever thinks about it at all."

Anne rose on her elbow with the idea of getting

up to confront the speaker, but the next minute she let herself fall back into the cushions. "If she believes anything so foolish as that about me, what's the use of saying anything?" she asked herself bitterly.

"Well, I'm thankful he's taken Anne to the doctor," Mrs. Parkes went on unexpectedly. "I've been trying to get him to do it for the last month, but he didn't want to worry Miss Lucia. I think she's fonder of Anne and has spoiled her more than she has the others. I told her father that child ought to stay out of school for awhile."

To Anne, squeezing her hands together and trying to crowd back hot tears, the tone seemed almost triumphant. She did not want to hear more; she could not stand it to have her affairs talked over in this way; she ——

And then for the first time Effie said something in an audible voice, and Anne's eyes grew big with anxiety. It seemed to be in answer to some question put to her by Mrs. Parkes, and the calm of her manner made it all the more impressive.

"Oh, no, ma'am, I probably shouldn't stay after the new housekeeper gets settled. It would be better, I should think, for her to engage someone else."

"Mercy, Effie! I don't know what they would do without you," Mrs. Parkes began, but a sudden

rush of children from the dining-room interrupted her.

"Going to sit up till Daddy comes home," exulted Susan. "Connie's going to tell us a story soon's you go, Mrs. Barkes."

"Susan!" Connie was deeply shocked. "That's very rude. And you mustn't say 'Barkes.' It's Mrs. Parkes."

"I like 'Barkes,'" persisted Susan sweetly. "It 'minds me of my little dog I lost."

"Susan Ellis Sheldon! You never lost a dog. I'm ashamed of you." That was Connie, very firm and severe.

"I wouldn't say such things, would I, Con?" demanded Jimsey with the manner of one who feels his own goodness.

"Anyway, I—I fink once I had a little-bitsy dog 'at I could put in my apron pocket. An'—an' he got lost fru a hole," averred Susan, deep sadness in her voice.

"Aw, you dreamed it." Jim was scorn itself. "Leggo Mrs. Parkes' dress. You got tooken away once."

"I'll go—I'll go," said Mrs. Parkes. "You needn't push me any more, Susan Sheldon. But you just remember that you mustn't come over to ask me if I have any cookies in my cooky-jar."

"De-ah Auntie Parkes," began Susan in alarm,

and then with a quick return to joyousness, "oh, your eye's going winkity. It's only a pwetend, and you do want me to eat your cookies. I'll come the very next day after this night."

There was a confusion of laughter and hugs and promises on the part of Susan and Mrs. Parkes, and finally the latter went away. Then Anne could hear Connie washing the children's hands in the lavatory at the end of the hall, and a few minutes later they came into the living-room.

"Is your head all better?" queried Jim, putting clean cool fingers on Anne's forehead.

"Let me—let me," clamored Susan, pushing him away and just missing her sister's eye with a determined elbow. "Nannie, does your poor head feel so's you can sit in a chair?" she cooed. "I like Sister's stories better when we can all be on the sofa."

"I feel like saying I won't tell you a story, Susan Sheldon. Don't you try to make poor Anne get ——" But Anne herself interrupted Connie's protest.

"I don't mind. I'll sit in the big chair," she said indifferently.

"I told them they might stay here and wait for father if they'd go to bed the minute he said good-night to them," Connie explained. As a precautionary measure she seated herself between them on

the sofa and began telling a story which could be made to fit a delay of any length.

Anne listlessly studied the group through half-closed eyes. Connie's hair was brown, and she had a warm color in her cheeks, and great dark eyes. Jim, aged seven, cuddled his fair head confidingly into the shelter of her arm, but Susan, looking out from a tangle of golden curls with eyes deeply blue, preferred to put her head on a cushion and her sandaled feet in Connie's lap.

It suddenly occurred to Anne that in the stories she had read it was the eldest sister who told stories to the younger children, but in this family it was always Connie. It was she whom they called "Sister," just as if the older two did not belong to them. Anne had never thought of this before, and felt queerly surprised over the idea. Even Rose could do more with them than she could, she told herself forlornly.

"Suddenly," Connie proclaimed the word with dramatic intensity, "suddenly there was a great noise and the—the trampling of many feet." She paused and listened with her head cocked on one side, and Susan sat bolt upright in her excitement. "And—and it was ——"

"Daddy!" shrieked both children, jumping up and running to meet their father, who was coming in with Rose and Ellis.

CHAPTER II

A BLUE KIMONO

ANNE, alone in the living-room, could hear her father laugh and protest against this sudden onslaught. She knew without seeing that Susan and Jim were searching Daddy's pockets for bright pennies. Presently she could hear Connie taking the children upstairs, and father running half-way up in pursuit of them and making them shriek with laughter. Then he came into the library, flushed and breathing quickly. Rose was hanging on his arm, besieging him with questions, and Ellis followed reading the evening paper.

"Why, Nan, you're almost lost in that big chair." Father shook himself free from Rose's grasp, and walking across the room looked down on Anne with a puzzled expression, as though she were a special problem which must be solved at once. "Did you get home all right, and is your head better?"

Anne nodded a languid assent, and Rose saved her the trouble of speaking.

"Green or lavender or sky-blue pink, Dadsy?" she asked, flourishing a yellow paper bag under his

nose. "Dear me! I wonder if I shall ever have money enough to buy candy by the box. Bags are so unstylish."

"Is this the way you spend your money?" Her father, peering into the bag, became suddenly conscious of his duty as a parent. "Take it away. I wouldn't eat one of those colored things for a farm. No, on second thoughts, I'll keep it for you until tomorrow. You've had enough."

He was sitting down by this time, and Rose could fling her arm around his neck. "Daddy, darling, why do you have second thoughts when your first ones are so nice?" she coaxed, trying gently to loosen his hold on the bag, but just as she was sure of success he grasped it firmly again.

"No, you audacious young person, you mayn't have it," he said, getting up from his chair and starting for the door. Connie, coming into the room at that minute, thought, as she often did, that when father stood his straightest he looked almost as tall as the ceiling. "I ought not to approve of your eating such stuff, and I—well, of course, I don't. I've got to get into practise in being very strict with you all before next week."

"Why that particular date?" questioned Ellis, looking up from the baseball news.

"Can't you remember for one minute that Mrs.—Mrs. Thing-a-majig is coming then to take

care of us?" Rose said with a groan, and then, as she had remarked a dozen times before, "Why Aunt Lucia should want to go way out west and leave us when we love her so and we're so nice ——"

"But Uncle Charles loves her so, and he's so nice," interrupted Connie. "But, honestly, Daddy, why do we have to have her—the lady that's coming, I mean. I'd do a lot, and Effie could cook and sweep, and Anne could tell the rest of us what to do."

There was a shout of laughter from Rose and Ellis. "Anne!" said Rose, still chuckling. "I should like to see old Nan coming out of a book long enough to know anything about what's going on in the house. Aunt Lucia never made her do any housework, even when the rest of us had to."

"That was because ——" Connie began loyally, but just then Effie warned them that dinner would be on the table in five minutes, and there was a general scampering off to wash hands.

Anne walked slowly into the dining-room, feeling lonely and neglected. It seemed to her that everyone else in the world was having a good time, and that nobody cared because she was not well and must give up school. Mrs. Parkes even seemed glad, and Rose had said she was in luck. That was all they knew about it, she thought irritably. School and study and reading meant more to her

than anything else, and she didn't like housework and looking after children.

"My word, Nan! Suppose your face should freeze that way," said Ellis in mock horror. His father was directly behind him as they came into the room, and his arm went around the boy's neck with a suddenness that smothered further speech.

"Don't tease your sister, son," father said, looking at Anne with a smile, which, if she had only understood it, was trying to tell her that he knew just how she felt and could sympathize. But she did not look up to see the smile, and because her father spoke lightly Anne felt that he did not realize in the least what it meant, not only to her but to the whole family, to have her progress in school interrupted. Ever since she could remember she had planned to be a writer, and to take care of all of them with the money she should earn. Now that must be given up, she supposed.

In the midst of the gay chatter going on around the table she had a tantalizing vision of herself carrying her first published work to her father, and saying with a proud thrill in her voice, "Daddy, dear, this is my book. And here is a check for a thou——" it would probably be more—"for five thousand dollars." Anyway, it would have been something like that. But now, if she couldn't study——

"Anne! Come back! Your eyes are like saucers, and I don't believe you know whether there's anything on your plate or not." Rose was passing the toast to her sister, and Anne returned to a knowledge of present surroundings with a start, and took a slice from the plate. She did not want to eat, but this would do for a make-believe as well as anything.

"Say, Nan, are you going in for that prize essay in your class?" Ellis inquired suddenly, and then before she could speak the mute misery of her face made him remember. "Oh, I forgot, I didn't mean to remind you of it—truly. Though why anyone who can skip lessons for the winter shouldn't know when she's well off I can't see."

A sudden color flared in Anne's cheeks, then departed, leaving her paler than before. She wanted more than anything else to run from the table to the shelter of her own room, but a prolonged ringing of the door-bell kept her in her chair.

"I'll go; I'm nearest." Rose's chair went over with a clatter as she jumped, but she only cast a rueful glance behind her and sped into the hall. They could hear her talking to some one, and suddenly she said in a disgusted tone, "Oh, what a pencil!" A second later she shut the front door and came back.

"Special delivery for you, Daddy," she announced. "I had to sign for it with a pencil without any point."

Mr. Sheldon read the two pages of the letter without a word, and then went back to the beginning and read it through again. Anne, watching, fancied there was an expression of relief in his face.

"Oh, father, what is it?" begged Connie, who had waited as long as she could.

"The lady who was coming to keep house for us writes that her sister has met with an accident, and she must go to her instead."

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Fifty hurrahs!" responded the usually well-behaved Connie, and her jubilation was echoed by Rose and Ellis.

"Children! Children! Think of the poor lady who is hurt." Father was trying to frown, but he could not manage to make it convincing when his eyes looked pleased.

"Well, it's a reprieve," remarked Ellis, who liked to air his knowledge of words.

"That's all." His father's contentment vanished. "It's only all to do over again," he added with a sigh, and went on eating in an absorbed and unwonted silence. For awhile the family chatter failed to bring any response from him, but suddenly, throwing off the mood that had seized him, he be-

came his merriest self again, and helped to make dinner the joyous feast it usually was.

Later on Anne was thinking it over as she made her preparations for bed. Rose had already pulled the bedclothes under her chin, and with her golden hair spread out on the pillow, and her cheeks rosy from the scrubbing she had given them, looked even prettier than usual. Anne loved pretty people and hated to be homely. She tugged at her long hair discontentedly as she combed out the snarls.

"I s'pose it's awfully expensive to have a housekeeper," she ventured after a little silence. "And we do wear out lots of shoes and stockings. Rose, did you ever think Effie might not stay if there's a housekeeper here?"

"Effie!" Rose's brown eyes lost their meditative look. "Gracious! You scared me for a minute. I should say not. Good old Effie wouldn't leave us for anything. She's crazy over Connie and the kids."

"I'm sure I don't know what we should do without her," sighed Anne, wondering whether she should tell what she had heard Effie say, and finally deciding not to do so.

"Listen, Nan, there's the dandiest pair of brown shoes in Smith's window," Rose murmured dreamily. "Perfect beauties! Marked down. I'd

never get another such bargain. Do you think I could coax Daddy ——"

"I s'pose you could, but I wouldn't. Mrs. Parkes thinks it's hard for Daddy to pay for such a large family."

"Oh, fuddy-duddy! She's always trying to manage us. I know Aunt Lucia wouldn't let me miss such a chance." Rose looked at her sister eagerly, but receiving no encouragement, frowned. Then she turned on her side and shut her eyes, thereby intending to signify that, so far as she was concerned, conversation was over for the night. A few minutes later her regular breathing showed that she had no intention of staying awake to bother her head about anything—even a bargain in brown shoes.

It was no such easy matter for Anne to go to sleep, for her wide-awake mind persisted in trying to think things out. It had been such a surprise to have father insist upon taking her to the doctor; bit by bit she reviewed the visit, and wished fruitlessly that Daddy did not have so much faith in his college chum. Then, with a sudden leap, her mind went back to a day shortly before Aunt Lucia went away when her aunt had looked at her almost tearfully. "Oh, Anne," she had said, "oh, Anne, darling, they keep telling me I've spoiled you most of all. Ple-ease don't let them prove it."

Anne frowned over this memory. "Now why did Aunt Lucia say that?" she asked herself, and then, defiantly, "I can't see that I'm any spoilder than the others." Which, after all, she confessed the next instant, did not improve matters much, particularly as she was the eldest daughter.

"If I were a girl in a story," her thoughts ran on, "now is the time I should find something big to do." In the next wistful moments she could clearly see herself rescuing from death some child whose wealthy father would reward her with money enough to take care of all the family for life. She should hate to take money for anything of that kind, she assured herself proudly, but in spite of that noble feeling, she could not help following the story far enough to picture herself the comfort and support of her father, and a much-admired eldest sister giving pleasure of every kind to the others.

She shook herself out of her imaginings with a little sigh. "It's too foolish for words, Anne Sheldon, for anyone almost sixteen to spend her time fancying things that can't possibly come true. I'm going to sleep."

Lying very still with her eyes shut, she heard for the first time the slow tread of someone walking in the room below hers. "Poor Daddy! He misses Aunt Lucia as much as I do," she thought. And then her eyes flew open and her mind was awake

again. Perhaps her father was worrying because there were so many in the family and not enough money to take care of them. She should always be thinking of that now.

She tried to decide what her favorite heroine would do under like circumstances, but it frightened her even to fancy how that imaginary young person would learn to cook and keep house and help her father save money.

There was just enough possibility about this vision to make her shiver. "I'm not clever that way," she told herself excusingly. "I should never have time to read and write. Besides, I don't like that kind of work."

"That ought not to make any difference—and you could learn to do those things," a voice within her said with such startling distinctness that she turned half-expectantly toward Rose, who was still sleeping peacefully, rolled in much more than her share of the bedclothes.

"Piggy!" murmured Anne, tugging at the comforter and prepared to struggle for her rights. "I'm going to ask father if I mayn't have Aunt Lucia's room." Then at the thought of what a refuge that room had been for all the children, her head dropped back on the pillow.

A few moments later a queer excitement took possession of her. Suppose, after all, she should

try. They all hated the idea of a strange housekeeper. It would be rather like living in a story, which would be some comfort. All of a sudden she found herself planning little things to say and do. If she could get father alone before he went to the office the next morning she might talk it over with him. But then he never had a minute in the morning, and, of course he wouldn't want her to do it, and would only laugh and say it wasn't necessary.

"*Do* move over," she said crossly to Rose, taking a fresh grasp on the bedclothes, and just then she heard her father covering the fire.

"He's getting ready to go to bed," she thought, and almost without intention her feet came to the floor with a soft thump and she was hurrying into wrapper and slippers. Then these same impetuous feet carried her out of the room and down the stairs, while her mind seemed to be trying its best to hold her back. It was hard for her to tell anyone her thoughts and plans, and she had never been able to talk as freely even to her father as the other children had.

She hesitated an instant at the foot of the stairs, but went on to the door of the living-room. When she saw her father sitting by the fire and looking very sober she forgot all about trying to act like a story girl, and said breathlessly, "Daddy—Daddy,

would you mind talking to me a few moments?" And then, all at once, she was across the room and curled up on his knees with her arm around his neck.

"Why, Nannie-chicken, is this you? I was just thinking about you," he said, snuggling her into his arms as though she were a little girl again. "I was afraid you might be finding it hard to go to sleep."

The unexpected thought of her touched Anne, and she felt the tears spring into her eyes. This was no time to cry, however, and she winked them away valiantly. "I never was wider awake in my life," she replied, swallowing hard, "and—and I wanted to ask you something."

"Yes," her father encouraged. "What is it, dear? Something about school?"

"No-o. I didn't suppose it was any use to try to make you change your mind about that." Anne felt a sudden wild hope spring up in her heart, but her father's next words dispelled it.

"Anne, I believe that doctor chap knew what he was talking about," he said earnestly. "It seemed good sense to me. Sometimes I think if one could only have the right kind of a change at the right time it would mean ——" he rubbed his hand over his forehead wearily and failed to finish his sentence. It was hard to realize that he was the same

man who had made the dinner-table so gay. But the next moment he was smiling at Anne and demanding to know what designs she had upon him.

"Speak up, daughter," he said with his usual cheerfulness. "You may have anything to the half of my kingdom, you know."

"Oh, Daddy, you couldn't give me more than a sixth," she protested, still putting off the telling of what she had in mind.

"That's so. There are six of you, aren't there? It's too much for one father to keep you all in mind at the same time," he jested, "but, my goodness, what would that same father do without every last one of you?"

"Father," Anne cleared her throat and waited a second. Somehow it seemed to her that if she once made the bargain she should never be free again. Then words came with a rush. "Father, now that the housekeeper lady can't come, let's not have one. If she isn't here perhaps Effie will stay, and I'll try—truly I'll try to help and—and to learn how to do things."

To her surprise her father didn't laugh and say it wasn't necessary, but perched her on his knee, where he could look into her face with a sudden queer eagerness.

"Nan, do you really believe we could manage it

that way?" he asked wistfully. "If you only knew how I hate to think of having a stranger come into our family. But I don't want to put too much on your shoulders—I don't know what your Aunt Lucia would say to me—you never have done housework or looked out for the children, have you?" He was thinking as he talked, and saying just what came into his mind. "Do you suppose it would hurt you or—or make you worse in any way?"

"Make me worse? Make me better, you mean." For Anne it was a new experience to have her big jolly father look like a worried child and actually ask her opinion about serious things. "Didn't that horrid doctor say I ought to wash dishes and sweep and dust? You know he said I must have a lot of exercise," she added thoughtfully, "and I should be a perfect dummy at tennis and basket-ball and skating. Besides, I don't enjoy doing things with the other girls and boys very well."

"Oh, Anne," cried her father as if this were an unpleasant revelation to him, "why not? Aren't you a social sort of person?"

"I don't know. I don't seem to fit in." She stared into the fire with a little frown. Then she came back to the question in hand. "Daddy," she said suddenly, "is it hard to get money enough to take care of us?"

Her father was obviously startled by the ques-

tion, but since this seemed to be the moment for perfect candor he answered as sincerely as she had asked.

"Rather hard," he responded. "At times, when you all wear out your shoes at once, I wonder whether my salary is going to stretch out. Did you think it was easy?"

"I never thought about it at all until to-day," Anne answered honestly, firmly resolved that he should never know what made her think about it now. "It would be easier then, wouldn't it, if you didn't have to pay a housekeeper?"

"A great deal. You see, your Aunt Lucia loved you all so much that she never would let me pay her anything for staying with us. It was all Uncle Charles and I could do to persuade her to leave you. But having someone else is a different proposition. I hardly see, though, how we're going to manage without a housekeeper. It would never do for you to try to manage Effie. And there are the kiddies. That won't be easy."

"Connie would help—and, anyway, I shouldn't know how to manage Effie; she'd have to tell me what to do. I wonder——" Anne paused and looked at her father with the dawning of a new idea in her eyes.

"Go on," he encouraged.

"Couldn't you," she hesitated, "couldn't you

give Effie a little more money each week, and then perhaps she'd be glad to stay and—and teach me." It required real heroism to add the last words, but she did it valiantly.

"Anne, I didn't know you were such a practical and helpful young person," her father said admiringly. "That's just the thing, and Effie's been so faithful I should be glad to do it."

"And—and can you afford it?" Anne asked shyly.

"Yes; if we don't have a housekeeper."

"Effie would really be housekeeper, wouldn't she?" Anne demanded after a thoughtful pause. "And what should I be—vice-housekeeper? I can't say I'm taken with that title."

"Let's think of a better one. I have it. You see, I'm the chauffeur, and this winter you shall be"—father waved his hand as though politely introducing her to her new position—"you shall be the steering-gear of the Sheldon Six. You know how important that is in an automobile, even if we haven't arrived at owning one."

"Me! Steering-gear!" cried Anne, shocked into being ungrammatical. "Why, I couldn't steer anything or anyone. Rose and Ellis would have a fit over that idea."

"Don't tell them, then. Let them find out for themselves what you can be when you try," father

answered promptly. "All they need to know is that you're going to stay away from school for awhile and get strong, and that the housekeeper isn't coming just yet. And now, chicken, run upstairs to bed. You should have been asleep long ago, but I'm glad you weren't." He put her gently off his knee and stood looking down at her.

"Say, Anne," he went on abruptly, "isn't that a new frock you're wearing? It's very becoming."

"Oh, Daddy, it's my old kimono." She laughed with real enjoyment of the joke.

"I don't care if it is. The blue brings out the color of your eyes, and your hair is so handsome that ——"

"My hair!" Anne interrupted incredulously, a faint flush stealing into her cheeks. She was standing very straight and slender, with her heavy braid of hair over one shoulder, and the blue gown falling in folds to her feet. "My red hair! Why, Daddy, no one ever thinks I'm good-looking. Even Aunt Lucia ——"

"I don't care," persisted her father, "*I* do. And let me tell you that red-haired, blue-eyed girls get what they're going for when they start out in real earnest. You've buried yourself in books up to date, and you don't know what your other capacities are."

"If I were only sure I had any," murmured Anne, still under the glamour of this unaccustomed praise. And then she kissed her father and went off to bed.

CHAPTER III

IN A HARD CORNER

ANNE fell asleep in the midst of planning to get up early and begin immediately to show how helpful she could be. When she awoke, at first a little bewildered by so sound a slumber, the sunshine lay in slanting lines across the bed, and a hasty investigation showed that for once her energetic sister had dressed and departed without noise. Worse than that, the little clock on the table pointed accusingly to ten.

"Goodness! Geometry's over! Why didn't somebody call me?" she said aloud, but even in the act of springing out of bed she realized the uselessness of hurrying.

"This is the way it will be all the time," she thought, beginning to dress slowly. "One day just like another, and nothing to look forward to." The glow and interest she had felt when she was with her father had disappeared, and this morning the plans they had made seemed impossible. She must talk it all over with Daddy again. It wouldn't be a pleasant thing to tell him that she

couldn't do what she had thought herself willing to try, but nothing mattered much compared to the cruel fact that at the beginning of her junior year she should be cut off from school and her beloved reading.

She finished dressing and started downstairs. "I may as well go for my books this morning and have it over with," she decided, and with this in mind turned toward the hall closet to get her hat and coat.

"You ain't thinkin' of goin' anywhere without your breakfast, are you?" Effie, who had evidently been on the watch for her, appeared at the dining-room door. "Your Pa said you wasn't to be woke, but I'll have it ready in a minute."

"I couldn't eat a thing," protested Anne. "I'm going to school for my books. Rose and Ellis will never think to bring them."

"More'n likely not," Effie assented dryly. "But listen to one thing: if you want to get back to school quick—for keeps—you won't do it by neglectin' to eat your breakfast. You set down now, and I'll be right back."

She was half-way to the kitchen as she finished speaking, and Anne, in spite of her self-absorption, noticed that there was an air of excitement about Effie quite different from her usual calm. More than that, she was really talking of her own free

will, instead of merely answering questions in the fewest possible words. Anne wondered over it for a moment, and then returned to the wearisome consideration of her own troubles.

"There!" Effie came back with an orange cut in halves, and, before Anne could finish it, was in again with crisp toast, a poached egg and steaming cocoa. Her cheeks were red, and there was a look of affectionate concern in her eyes that warmed Anne's heart. Suddenly Effie, about whom she had not thought much before, became to her mind a dear, dependable family treasure whose loss could not be borne.

"Oh, Effie," she said, setting down the cup with a hand that trembled a little, "you won't go away, will you? I—we—why, we couldn't get along without you."

"I ain't thinkin' of goin' yet awhile." The flush in Effie's cheeks deepened, and she was manifestly gratified. "Your Pa had a little talk with me this mornin', and I said I'd stay on for the present."

So that was it. Father had told her, and Effie was pleased, and a little excited over the prospect of more work and greater responsibility. Anne felt ashamed of her own backsliding and tried hard to renew the enthusiasm of the night before. "I'll help—truly I will," she said heroically. "And you can teach me everything I ought to know."

"Oh, there ain't no call for you to do any real work. I can git along all right if only you children won't clutter so."

"Aunt Lucia used to help." Anne felt great relief at being absolved from responsibility, but she had a certain sense of not living up to her agreement with father.

"Miss Lucia knew how," Effie said quickly. "Sometimes when folks don't know how they hinder more'n they help." She was smiling, and quite evidently trying not to hurt Anne's feelings. "No, you get strong," she went on soothingly, "and don't bother your head about housework. Of course there might be some little things you could do, and there's always the children to be looked after."

Anne felt like protesting, but what was the use? Last night she had had noble ideas of learning to cook and becoming a wonderful manager, but now she realized that her part would consist in doing the small duties that might slip through Effie's efficient fingers.

"I shall never know what to do nor how to do it," she said to herself disgustedly. She was putting on her hat in the hall, and the sight of Susan's small sweater brought its wearer vividly before her. "Fancy me being steering-gear for her—or for any of them." She shivered at the

mere idea, and closed the front door hastily, as if by so doing she could leave these disturbing thoughts behind.

The gong was striking for recess as Anne went up the stairs of the High School, and she wished nervously that she had come after school, and that she need not meet the girls who were pouring out of the class-rooms. Rose had saved her the trouble of breaking the news, however, and they crowded around her, asking questions and telling her they were sorry. Anne, who had never thought they cared much for her, suddenly decided that she had been wrong, and she felt a new pang over leaving the class with which her fortunes had been cast.

"Too bad. We thought you were going to do such good work on the 'Oracle,'" a passing girl, one of the seniors, said regretfully. "I know from experience how horrid it is to drop out of a class and go in again with girls you don't know well," and she went on leaving Anne with both uplifting and depressing thoughts.

"My goodness! Doesn't that make you feel important, Anne Sheldon? I should be all of a twitter if Lila Durham took time to notice me. My writing is never appreciated anyway," remarked a pretty girl, giggling over her own idea. "But it won't be any fun coming back with girls you're not crazy over, will it?"

The thrill caused by the friendly senior was swept away by the repetition of this disagreeable thought, and Anne's face grew more sober as the girls came and went, saying pleasant, regretful words. She began to feel that up to now she had missed a part of what school should mean to her.

The teachers, too, were kind, and sorry that her work must be interrupted. Only the plump little teacher of Domestic Science, whose classes Anne had attended grudgingly, said with her funny smile, "My dear, I'm sorry you have to be made unhappy, but I think it's the best thing that ever happened to you, if you've sense enough to find it out." A remark which Anne thought peculiar, to say the least, and put out of her mind as soon as possible.

On the way home a sudden blankness fell upon her, and she wondered what to do next, and could think of nothing she should enjoy. Everything pleasant had come to an unexpected end, and she did not know how to begin to make life go smoothly again.

She dropped her books on one of the porch chairs, and sat down in the swing seat already occupied by Connie's kitten. She and Flaxy did not care much for each other, but the kitten preferred anyone's lap to sleeping by herself, and presently crawled into Anne's, where, though not welcome, she was passively permitted to stay.

Gazing listlessly streetward, Anne saw an automobile slow up and turn into the driveway of the house opposite. It was a large white house with imposing pillars and beautiful shrubbery and a general air of distinction. The two old ladies who had lived in it all their lives had died within the last year, and Anne remembered now that Connie had said the place was sold, and that the people were coming this week. Connie always took a friendly interest in her neighbors, and usually knew something of what was going on in each family.

Anne watched, but found nothing to interest her in the new arrivals. A plump lady got out of the automobile first and turned to assist a taller lady and a girl who was more slender than Connie, but about her height. Anne noticed that she leaned on the arm of the plump lady as they walked across the porch.

"I suppose she's an only daughter, and can have everything she wants. Probably she could buy a dozen pairs of shoes and her father wouldn't know the difference." Anne's imagination was in the habit of making decisions without foundation. "I daresay it doesn't hurt her eyes to read, and she can go to school."

She was too miserable even to smile at her own foolishness. Instead, she frowned over the injus-

tice of it all, and made up her mind that the world was wholly wrong for the time being.

The kitten in her lap stirred, and then nestled more deeply. Unconsciously Anne's fingers found their way to the soft head, and her rhythmic stroking made the sleepy little thing purr with satisfaction. It was warm on the porch, and Anne shut her eyes because the sunshine was so bright.

Afterward she decided that she must have dozed, for nothing had prepared her for the sudden dash on to the porch of a large, barking dog, and the wild flight of the kitten up the canvas side of the swing, and from there to the ropes, where she clung perilously, calling down wrath on the invader.

At first Anne wanted to run, too, but almost immediately she realized that the dog did not look threatening, and that someone, calling to him, was racing up the front path.

"Jock! Jocky! You rascal!" panted the girl, coming on the porch and snapping a leash in the dog's collar before Anne could move or speak. Then she tugged him down the steps, and fastened the other end of the strap around a tree which stood at some distance from the house.

"Did he frighten you dreadfully?" she asked, coming back and looking from Anne to the kitten with some anxiety. "Poor little cat! Come down here, honey, and tell me what you want me to do to

this bad dog." She reached for the kitten, which tried to retreat, but in the end was forced to succumb to the gentle clutch of the stranger. By this time Anne realized that she wasn't just a girl of her own age, as she had at first supposed, but older.

"The poor thing is trembling all over," the girl went on, turning in such a way that the dog, who had made the best of the situation by flopping down, head on paws, was no longer visible to the kitten. "And you look a little—well—shaky—yourself." She was gazing at Anne with a penitent smile in which amusement lurked, and Anne smiled back, liking at once the brown eyes with their clear, friendly gaze, and the wavy hair which the sunshine turned to bronze.

"I suppose I was asleep; anyway, I thought the house was coming down," she confessed tremulously, and then, to her disgust, tears came to her eyes. "Oh, don't mind my being such a baby—it isn't just being frightened by the dog—everything's gone wrong, and—and the doctor says"—there was a rending sigh, "says I can't go to school." Anne stopped, appalled at herself for talking so confidentially to a stranger.

"Tell me about it—unless you'd rather not," the girl urged, sitting down in the swing seat with Anne and still cuddling the kitten. "I know something about having to obey a doctor's orders."

"You! Why, you don't look as if you were ever ill." Anne's surprise was an impulsive tribute to the color and glowing energy of the girl beside her.

"Oh, well, I worked too hard. I tried to think I was a machine and could go on forever. In consequence I've had to take six months' rest, and now —praise be—I'm going back to my beloved scribbling again."

Anne looked at her with awe. "Do you—do you mean you write?" she asked.

"Yes," answered the girl, her color deepening in response to Anne's admiring gaze. "Oh, it isn't much, and you wouldn't know my name, but some time it's going to be more and better. But tell me about yourself and why you are unhappy."

And so Anne told her troubles over again: something of what the doctor had said, enough concerning the family to make plain what she had before her, and a little about her talk with her father.

"You could do anything, couldn't you, for a father like that?" the listener commented, her dark eyes very soft. "But go on, please; I didn't mean to interrupt."

"That's all," Anne said forlornly. "Only, you see, I do so want to keep straight on with my education. The teachers are always saying that you lose so much if you have to miss a year. And I need

to know all I can, because—some day—I want to—to write." It seemed the most amazing thing in the world to be telling anyone of this cherished desire, but, having said it, she felt a sense of relief. "One has to know a great deal in order to write, I suppose," she ended wistfully.

"Yes, but it isn't all to be learned in school or out of books. Everything teaches one—just living more than all, perhaps." The words came pouring out eagerly, and the brown eyes were alight. "Why, every day of my life," she went on with convincing earnestness, "I am sorry that I haven't watched more carefully what is going on around me, and that I don't know more about people, and things that grow and fly and run about." She broke off with a little laugh. "Oh, of course, this can't seem the same to you, but please try to realize that all education isn't shut inside of books."

"Don't you believe in going to school and studying?" Anne felt a little as though the foundations of her life were crumbling beneath her.

"To be sure I do. As much of it as one can get. Only it isn't a killing misfortune if one has to drop out for a year. And think what a splendid chance you will have to study character with—did you say three sisters and two brothers?"

Anne nodded gravely. The situation hadn't oc-

curred to her in this light before, and it did not seem such a wonderful opportunity after all. Of course, no one outside the family could know that she hadn't the slightest influence with the others, and ——

"Why, even if you can't find time to write a word you'll be tucking away all sorts of knowledge that you can use later," the girl went on with inspiring enthusiasm. "It will be quite like playing a game to make such a place for yourself in the family that no one else can fill it."

"I'm stupid about games, and I don't like them," Anne murmured. "When I was a little girl I used to play some kind of a checker game with father, and he was always getting me into a corner where I couldn't get out. I remember it was rather nice, though, if you got into the king row and could move in any direction."

"That's it exactly," said the stranger, taking quick advantage of this small concession. "Of course, you play for the king row, but I'm an absurd person who rather enjoys struggling out of the corners."

"Yes, but people must like you, and I'm not the least bit popular." Anne was thinking aloud now, and looking into the far distance. "And I'm dreadfully shy, and I don't do the things the other girls and boys do—tennis and skating, I mean—

and I haven't the slightest influence over my sisters and brothers, and ——"

"Oh, dear me!" interrupted her new friend, putting her hands over her ears. "Stop this minute telling me everything you don't like and can't do and haven't. If you're not popular it's probably because you don't try to like others; and you won't be shy if you forget yourself and think about someone else. Perhaps you'll never like tennis and skating, but have you ever exercised enough over anything to know how fine it is?"

Anne stared at her blankly, and the girl laughed and went on more gently. "You're not used to being taken off your feet by such a whirlwind as I am, are you?" she said penitently. "Of course, no one can tell you how to work out your own problems, but ——"

"You forgot to—to scold me for what I said about not having any influence in my family." Anne's voice was meek, but there was a twinkle in her eye.

"Now you're laughing at me for preaching, but I don't mind. And if you do what you and your father have agreed upon, and don't think anything about having influence it will grow—I'm sure it will. Of course, you'll have to begin in small ways, and you'll get frightfully discouraged ——" The speaker broke off suddenly, with the look of one

who visions an uphill road and enjoys the thought of the struggle to surmount it.

Anne, longing to accomplish great things and dreading the smaller ones near at hand, was, nevertheless, deeply stirred by the fact that she was sitting in intimate converse with a person who wrote—and had things published. And that this same wonderful person was taking an interest in her troubles, and was evidently not thinking it silly of her to plan to be a writer some day.

"Oh," she said at last with a deep sigh of satisfaction, "seeing you this morning is almost like having a fairy godmother appear. Didn't you adore planning for fairy godmothers when you were little?"

"I'm still keeping a wish ready for mine when she does come," responded the girl, with her delightful smile. "Play I am yours, and write to me if your troubles get too big for you," she went on unexpectedly. "My name is Jean Graham, and I live in New York. Shall I take a bit of this paper and write the address for you?"

"May I really write to you? Oh, just suppose I hadn't been sitting here when you went by."

"It's only a chance that I'm in this town and that I came this way," laughed Jean Graham. "And if Jocky hadn't been so rude I might never have noticed the girl on the porch."

"Thank goodness then for Jocky," Anne said fervently. "I needed you badly, and I'm going to remember everything you've said and try—and try ——"

"Write me sometime and tell me all about it," said Miss Graham, rising hastily. "I promised my friend I'd be back for an early lunch, and it's striking twelve, and Jocky's trying to paw his collar off over his head. Stop it, you bad dog, and take me home."

Anne watched regretfully until Jock, exuberant in his joy, had tugged her new friend to the corner. There was a last friendly smile, the gay wave of a hand, and she was gone. Anne could almost believe she had dreamed it all.

For a moment she stood there going over in her mind what Miss Graham had said. "It's all a big game," she told herself, "and you try all the time for the king row, but you mustn't be discouraged if you get in a corner." After all, perhaps, it would be more interesting to call it a game and try to make the best moves she could. "And if you're shy it's because you're thinking about yourself. That's one on you, Anne Sheldon," her mind ran on, but just then her dreamy eyes focussed on an object nearer home, and she came back to hard reality in a hurry.

Along the street, scuffling the dead leaves in the

gutter, walked Susan, returning from kindergarten. Her hat hung over one shoulder, and a pink bow, which should have been proudly erect on the top of her head, sagged almost to the point of dropping off. From time to time the little coat she was carrying was switched through the leaves with an effect that pleased her, for she laughed aloud.

All at once the small defiant figure became to Anne a symbol of her troubles. If she could only gain some victory with Susan—now—before anyone else could get home, she should have courage to attempt more. So sure did she feel of this that the opposite became true to her imagination, and she was convinced that if she failed—" but you must not fail," she admonished herself stoutly, and advanced to the attack.

" Hello, Susan Sheldon," she called so joyously that her sister looked at her in round-eyed wonder. " It's fun poking through the leaves, isn't it? "

Susan, who had not expected to be received with enthusiasm, stole a furtive glance at dusty shoes and stockings, and lifted the coat to her arm. Then, without speaking, she bestowed on Anne a penetrating glance which made that young person feel that her secret plans must be written upon her face.

" I hoped someone would come and help me carry

my books upstairs," she hastened to say. "They're pretty heavy for me, and you're so strong."

"I'm not stwong enough for that," Susan answered coolly. "'Sides, I've got dirty hands, and you're always telling me not to touch your 'nice cle-un books.'"

"Score one for Susan," thought Anne, with an unexpected flash of amusement. "Now it's my move," she said to herself, and thought hard. "It was nice of you to remember about the hands," she remarked approvingly; "mine are not so very clean, but I'll carry the books, and let's both go and get washed for dinner."

"You don't need to help me—I can do it every bit myself," protested Susan, her face growing stubborn. "Nennyway, Connie's the only one I let wash me."

"I can do it just as well as Connie," Anne began impatiently, and realized at once that this was a wrong move. She could see plainly that her small sister was stiffening herself for a contest. "Upstairs in my room I've got a cunning doll's bureau," she went on hastily. "If you'll let me wash your hands and face and tie your ribbon you may play with it this afternoon."

"I—don't—b'lieve—I—want—it." Susan punctuated her remark by kicking the toe of a somewhat worn shoe against a post of the porch,

and Anne's heart sank. The sight of the shoe added something to the weight of her own probable defeat.

"It has little drawers with the cutest knobs on them, and you can truly open and shut them, and ——"

"I never had a little buweau," interrupted Susan, with the sweet sadness she seemed able to assume at will. "I never had anything pwetty like that. Would you—would you give it to me for my 'zactly own?"

Anne hesitated. In her eyes many of the treasures of her childhood were still dear, and she kept them with care, and had meant never to give them away. But now—she stooped to pick up her books and turned toward the front door.

"If you'll come and get ready for dinner, and try to be good while you're at the table, I'll give you the lovely bureau for your very own," she promised, trying not to show any anxiety as to the decision.

"You can wash me—you can wash me all over, and I'll be just as good—as good as Connie," Susan asserted rashly. Then slipping a small hand into her sister's, "De-ah Anne," she murmured with an upward glance of seraphic sweetness as they went into the house together.

CHAPTER IV

A MAN IN A CAR

"Aw, Susan! Don't be a baby!" This from Jim, who was stretched out on the dining-room floor near the window doing something with pencil and paper. "Why don't you eat the way Anne wants you to and not fill your mouth so full? If you do it right we'll get out to play some time."

Susan paused with uplifted spoon. "Saturday!" she said explosively, and narrowly escaped kicking her chair over backward in her anxiety to get away from the table. "I'm fwu," she announced, and frowned like a thunder-cloud when her sister laid a restraining hand upon her.

"If you don't eat your cereal you won't get big enough to wear my blue dress," warned Connie, who had finished her breakfast, but was hovering around to help Anne if she could.

"Play it's a heap of coal," suggested Anne with sudden inspiration, "and you can only put small bits on your shovel because it's a silver one."

"Pooh! You wouldn't ever have a silber shubble for coal." Susan's answer was scornful, but

she played the game nevertheless, measuring her spoonfuls daintily and holding the spoon as though it were heavy. It was often easy to manage Susan with a pretend.

Anne breathed a sigh of relief and sat back in her chair. Two weeks had gone by since the memorable day when she had brought her books home, and she was almost tempted to decide that, while having a fairy godmother was lovely, living up to her standards was a different proposition. Life seemed an endless succession of doing what she least wanted to do, and how could she be happy, or even cheerful, when each morning it tore her heart to see the others start for school?

To be sure, even so soon as this, the dull pain over her eyes was becoming less frequent, and she had received several delightfully friendly notes from Miss Graham, each one of which had given her something pleasant to think about. But the days were long, and reading for only a half-hour seemed the merest nibble. Effie was as good as she could be, but it was quite evident that she neither wanted to teach her nor to have her in the kitchen. And the small duties that fell to her share were more often than not things she disliked to do.

Anne sighed again, this time rather dismally. Life weighed upon her with unusual heaviness this morning, because it was her sixteenth birthday, and

no one in the family had remembered it. Aunt Lucia had always warned Daddy when birthdays were approaching, and Anne would have to do it for the others, but she couldn't, of course ——

"Anne! Anne!" It was a shout from Ellis, who was tramping up and down the hall. Ellis always went about the house noisily, and talked as though he were miles away. "Anne, have you seen my cap?"

"Where did you put it last night?" his sister questioned uselessly.

"If I knew I shouldn't be asking you. Oh, here it is in the scrap-basket. Someone must have knocked it off the desk." This last from the living-room in a good-natured bellow that made Anne shrink involuntarily.

"You shouldn't hang your hat on the desk; there are perfectly good hooks in the hall closet," said Rose, coming downstairs. She and Ellis bantered and bickered, but were good chums in spite of the fact that Anne came between them in age. Rose was in her first year at High School and Ellis was struggling through his last, but as neither cared much for study and both loved out-of-door sports, they had plenty of interests in common.

"Smarty!" returned Ellis. "*You* always put things away, don't you? Where are you off to now?"

Rose put her head into the dining-room. "I'm going to Edna's—oh, I know it's early, but she made me promise not to be late, because we're going to talk over a lot of plans. And if her mother asks me to stay to lunch I shall."

"But, Rose," Anne got up from her chair in her earnestness, leaving Susan to make way with her imaginary coal-pile as quickly as she wished, "Effie's going to clean the bedrooms next week, and she wants you to look over your bureau drawers and the closet this very day. I told you last night before Edna telephoned."

"Oh, fiddle! I forgot. I can't put Edna off—she gets so huffy if I change my mind. Effie'll have to air the dresses anyway when she cleans the closet, and I'll go over the bureau next Saturday or —or some Saturday."

Ellis exploded into a laugh. "This is my busy day," he said importantly. "Call her up some time next year, Anne, and she'll attend to it."

Rose flashed him a scornful glance and tried other tactics. "I'll give you my last quarter, Connie, if you'll clear up the bureau for me," she implored. "And if you see anything in the upper drawer you want just lay it aside, and if I can possibly get along without it, you shall have it." Rose was rashly generous at times.

"Shirk!" teased Ellis. "Don't you do it, Con."

"Why don't you take care of your own room?" Rose retorted, turning on him with such fierceness that he dodged involuntarily. "And where are *you* going, I should like to know? I heard you promise father faithfully that you'd cover the flower-beds this morning and put away the bulbs."

"Jingo! So I did. Well, I can do that this afternoon, and it won't make any difference to Dad."

"He gets home early to-day, and he'll think he has to do it if he finds you haven't." Connie, who was untying Susan's napkin and pulling back her chair, looked at her brother gravely.

"You are the most like the 'voice of conscience' of anyone I know, Con," Ellis responded gloomily. "I don't see how you can think up so many perfectly good reasons for making people do what they don't want to do. I told one of the boys I'd coach him in tennis this morning."

"Can't you do that this afternoon?" ventured Anne, who had hesitated to put in a word for fear she should say the wrong thing.

"Yes, but he can't; he's going away. Well, I'll go out in the garden because I said I would, but it's too gorgeous a morning to spend in a back yard."

"'Specially when it's your own yard. You could stand it perfectly well if it belonged to somebody else, and there were nice white lines and a net and

tennis racquets." Rose had put on her hat, and was edging toward the front door as she talked, but, though she laughed at her brother's discomfiture, she did not look exactly happy. "Well, Con, what are you going to do about it?" she questioned impatiently. "You won't get another such easy chance to earn a quarter—from me, at least."

"Buy a Thrift Stamp," murmured Jimsey, and then, hastily, "don't rub your fingers all over what I'm writing, Susan Sheldon."

Connie's eyes brightened at the mention of a Thrift Stamp. "Why I might—do it," she answered slowly, but the next minute she was shaking her head. "No, I can't. I promised to help Anne make beds and dust. And, anyway, if I did your bureau, you'd never be able to find anything, and you'd always be worrying me about it."

"All right for you. You could do it if you wanted, and I'll find a way to make you sorry." Rose's tone was threatening, but the valiant Constance, who never expected bad things to happen, only smiled—not the sweet forgiving smile of one ready to return good for evil, but an amused grin which made her sister feel she was wasting words.

"It's perfectly foolish having to do things just the moment someone else thinks you ought," Rose grumbled, with the air of one who is trying to con-

vince herself that she is right. "I can do the bureau and closet some day after I get home from school—or any old time."

"Yes, but Effie has to manage the work, and she wants it done when it's convenient for her." Anne's voice held the impatience she had been trying to repress. "I don't see why you can't help out once in awhile, Rose. You're not asked ——"

"Fiddlesticks! You wouldn't do anything yourself on Saturday if you went to school every day," Rose interrupted. "And you needn't think, Anne Sheldon, that because you're two years older than I am you can manage me, because you can't. I'm going to Edna's."

"Rose is so firm," remarked Ellis in his deepest voice as his sister flung out of the door. Then he walked across the room and prodded his small brother very gently with the toe of his shoe. Everyone except Susan was gentle with Jimsey.

"Want to go out in the garden and help me, kid?" he asked persuasively. "Say, what you been writing? That looks fine."

"It's a little poem. I made it all myself. My teacher wants us to write poems every day," explained Jim with modest pride. "You can read it if you want."

"Say, this is great for a kid that age. I couldn't do it so well myself. Listen to this:

'A little yellow flower
Put up its little head
Just like little children
Sitting up in bed.'

"That's very good. You're a smart kid, but I think you've got too many 'littles' in there," Ellis went on judicially. "Ask Anne if you haven't. She's the family writeress."

Anne laughed. Somehow it pleased her to have Ellis say that, little as it meant. "I can't write poems," she said quickly, "but I'm sure Ellis is right. Perhaps we can think up another word to put before 'head.'"

"Shy," said Connie; "no, it's got to have two syllables."

"Friendly," was Anne's suggestion.

"I know—I know—don't tell me." Jim was already erasing the offending word. "'Golden head.' You see, I said it was a yellow flower, and gold is yellow."

"Remarkable child," murmured Ellis, scrubbing the fair head until Jim squealed. "Now come out and cool your brain in the garden helping me."

"Me too! Me too! I want to help!" Susan got up from the floor and started for the hall. "I want to pick up the cunning blubs and shake the dirt off."

"Sure. You and Jim can do all that work if

you like." Ellis spoke as if he were conferring a favor, but he winked at Anne and Connie over the heads of the others.

Anne, looking at him with gratitude in her heart, because she had not really expected him to give up what he wanted to do, realized for the first time that Ellis was a handsome boy in spite of his clumsy bigness. He was a little like Connie in looks, with dark hair and eyes and a fine color, and lately he had begun to take some pains to keep his clothes and hands clean, and his tie from riding up over his collar. Thinking of this made Anne remember that he ought not to work in the garden in his school suit.

"Oh, Ellis, you must change your clothes before you go out," she said hastily. "Those won't be fit to wear if you get down in the dirt."

"Too much bother—anyway, I'm going to let the kids do the work while I do the heavy looking-on. Besides, this suit is getting shabby, and I'm going to strike father for a new one."

"Spots will show like everything on that, and even if father's willing you can't possibly get a new suit before Monday, and I think you look more stylish in this suit than in your best one." Anne drew a long breath, and wondered whether this remark would have any effect, or if some other reason would have done better.

Ellis stole a sly glance at the mirror, which didn't reflect as much of him as he wished it did. Unconsciously he straightened his shoulders and his hand wandered toward his tie. Perhaps this suit did have rather an air about it, he was thinking, and he wasn't sure that he didn't like the cut of it better than ——

"I've got an idea," said Connie, interrupting his meditations. "Let's get everything we ought to do done this morning, and then when father comes home we'll coax him to take a hike with us or—do something."

"Excuse me from family parties if Susan is going," remarked Ellis, still lingering in the vicinity of the mirror. "The last time the bunch went off to walk I had to carry her most of the way home. Say, Con, just run out in the yard, will you, and see that the kids don't touch anything till I get there. I've got to change my clothes." He went off up the stairs with his usual lazy slouch transformed into a two-steps-at-a-time gait. Though he wouldn't have confessed it, even to himself, he liked being told that he had some style about him.

Anne, left alone for awhile, finished clearing the table, brushed the crumbs from the rug, and got out a duster. She hated dusting, but she had found it was something Effie really liked to have her do, and

usually it was hard to decide when she was useful and when in the way of that busy woman.

She wiped the dust from the clock, and the two candlesticks, and father's silver loving-cup for what seemed to her the thousandth time. "Don't you dare get another speck of dust on you this week," she said sternly to them, and smiled, remembering it was Saturday, and she might possibly be obeyed. Then she began on the chairs, which she disliked even more than the mantel. She resolved fiercely that if she ever planned a house she would have cornerless rooms, no mantels and chairs without legs. Presently Connie came in, and together they dusted the living-room, and then went upstairs to do beds and bureaus.

The morning vanished as busy mornings always do, and at half-past twelve Anne and Connie came down into the front hall just as Ellis and the children appeared from the garden.

"All the beds made, and there are four perfectly spick and span bureaus," Connie exulted.

"We've made beds, too, garden beds, all covered up nice and warm," said Jim, "with a blanket of ——"

"And I shooked the dirt off the blubs," Susan was seldom willing to let Jim finish a sentence, "and Ellis put 'em away for all the cold, cold winter."

"I thought they were smarter, these two," Ellis grumbled. "I didn't expect to have to work so much, and I'm just about starved. I could eat the side of a house if it had frosting on it."

"Well, hurry up then and get ready for lunch. Daddy'll be here in a few minutes, and we want to look nice so he'll be glad to take us somewhere."

"I don't know that I want him to take me," Ellis said gloomily, but he started upstairs, nevertheless, while Connie was cajoling Susan into having her hands and face washed.

Fifteen minutes later, Mr. Sheldon got off the car at the corner, and the three younger children started off in a wild race to meet him. Anne, who had stepped out on the front porch, could hear them talking as they came along. Susan, as usual monopolizing the conversation, was telling her father how hard they had all worked this morning.

"All 'cept Wose," she ended, shaking her head solemnly. "Wose was bad—wouldn't do buweau —would go ——"

"Don't tell tales, small daughter," interrupted her father, "and do let someone else have a chance to talk. Here's Anne, who hasn't said a word."

He stooped to kiss Anne as he went up the steps, and questioned under his breath, "How goes it, Miss Steering-Gear? Has it been a good morning?"

"Yes," laughed Anne, the color coming into her cheeks. "Susan has 'shooken the dirt off the blubs,' Connie and I have shooken bedclothes and dusters, and Ellis and Jimsey have made the garden so neat that it doesn't look natural."

"Splendid!" Father's face lighted up like a boy's, and, as Connie said later, he looked as though he wanted to hug them all. "I was planning to have John Dookins help me with some work this afternoon, but he can't come, and I suggest ——" He paused tantalizingly and smiled into Connie's anxious face.

"Oh, please go on," she implored.

"I suggest that we have our lunch and then go partying somewhere all together."

"Hurrah!" shouted Connie, "that's just what we were going to ask you. Only I'm afraid Ellis won't go ——" She looked appealingly at her brother, who was coming downstairs in his gray suit with his hair wet and spatted down smoothly. "Do go, Ellie," she coaxed; "we want another man in the party."

"Oh, I'll go," Ellis agreed grudgingly, secretly flattered by being called a man. "But for goodness' sake don't say 'Ellie' again. Some of the boys heard you the other day and they've been calling me 'Ellie' and 'Miss Sheldon' ever since."

"Boys are hateful," Connie retorted with unex-

pected bitterness. "That is—I don't think you are, Ellie—oh, dear, there it is again. I'll have to sew up my mouth."

"Where's Rose?" asked Mr. Sheldon, as they all sat down at the table a few minutes later.

"She's having lunch with Edna." Anne spoke quickly in order to forestall Susan, who was anxious to explain, but had just taken a mouthful of something hot. "Jim can run over there for her if you want her to go with us."

"We shall miss her, but I think we'll get along without her," father said coolly, and Anne wondered whether he had taken in more than she supposed of Susan's first statements.

They did not linger over lunch, for on November afternoons, however beautiful, the sun tucks his head away early. It was an Indian summer day, and the sky was blue and the sunshine warm. In the cool, dry air lingered the scent of burning leaves.

Connie, at least, always started on these walks with a deep sense of adventure in her heart. One never knew a minute beforehand whether father would turn to the left or right or go straight ahead. Indeed she was quite sure Daddy himself didn't always know, but when he led his flock abroad he seemed to have a guiding sense which made him choose the streets on which something interesting would happen.

On this day they had scarcely started when pleasant things began, for Mrs. Parkes came out on her porch with a box of her famous peanut brittle. "I was going to bring it over this afternoon," she said, "but if you're off for a walk you'd better have it now. Dear me! I wish I could go with you, but you needn't look so scared, Anne, for I can't."

Anne blushed, and wished that Mrs. Parkes' sharp eyes had lighted on someone else. It was hard for her to believe that she had shown in her face how little she wanted this neighbor of theirs to go. She firmly resolved not to eat any of the candy, tempting as it was. It was always a trial to her to accept favors when she disliked the person who offered them.

"Here's a corner—let's go this way," said Daddy, stopping the forward march so unexpectedly that Anne, deep in her own thoughts, fairly walked on his heels.

"Excuse me," she began, and then was interrupted by the excited honking of an automobile horn which seemed to be talking to them. The next moment the machine stopped and its occupant came by a flying leap into the midst of the little group.

"Well, of all men—Sheldon!" The stranger was shaking hands warmly with father, and looking from one to the other with bright, dancing eyes.

"I'd forgotten you lived in this town, Sheldon; and does this bunch belong to you? My word! Some family!"

His hat was off and he had put out his hand to Anne almost before her father had a chance to introduce her. Then each of the others received a friendly grip and a smile which won their hearts. And, of all things, his name was Darling; a coincidence which so surprised Connie that, to her own confusion, she bubbled into laughter. Afterwards she confided to Anne that she knew right away that he was a perfect darling of a man.

"Came way out here to call on an aunt and some cousins in this first—second—third house back here, and there isn't a soul at home—house shut as tight as a drum," Mr. Darling went on without waiting to be asked any questions. "Came early so that I could take them to ride, and now I don't know whether they've just gone to the store or gone—to Africa."

"I know," Connie said quickly. "They went yesterday, and they're going to be away over Sunday. Miss Helen is my teacher, and she told me."

"There you are," responded Mr. Darling sadly, though his eyes twinkled. "No chance for me if I do hang around. And now I haven't anyone to play with all this beau-ti-ful afternoon." He was

looking straight at Susan with such a sorrowful face that that rather hard-hearted small person was touched.

"De-ah Mistah Dahling, you may play with us," she comforted. "Our Daddy is taking us for a walk, and he'll take you too."

"Bless your heart, I believe he would if I asked him. He's such a good fellow—this father of yours. But, instead, suppose you all come for a ride with me. How about it, Sheldon?"

"Oh, Daddy, do, do," implored Connie, for whom automobiles were things of enchantment, and rides not frequent. Even Anne looked eagerly at her father, and Susan and Jim were already edging toward the machine.

"We should be delighted if you're sure you want such a tribe, Darling." Mr. Sheldon spoke doubtfully, and Connie again swallowed a chuckle. It was so funny to hear father calling a man by this affectionate name.

"Of course I do. Now pile in, and we'll go to your house and get some warm wraps. We don't want to have to hurry home because someone is cold."

At the house there were a few minutes of wild preparation. Effie came in to help, and Anne overheard father giving her directions as to a late dinner. He must think, then, that they would be

gone a long time, she reflected, for now it was only two o'clock. Suddenly she remembered Rose and her fondness for unexpected treats like this. "It's her own fault," she thought soberly. "If she had stayed at home and helped she could have gone too." The next moment she was pulling her father into a corner of the hall and talking in a low, eager tone.

"Daddy, suppose I take along a sweater, and we go 'round by Edna's for Rose. She loves surprise parties like this."

"I seem to have got the idea," father began slowly, looking as if desire and his duty as a parent were having a tug-of-war, "I seem to have got the idea more than once lately that Rose"—he frowned a little,—"that Rose is something of a slacker. No, don't tell me about this morning—I can guess at it pretty well—and if she can't share our work perhaps she'd better not share our pleasure—this time, anyway." Daddy released himself from Anne's detaining fingers and hurried off with the air of one who might change his mind if he thought about the subject another minute.

Anne was disappointed and showed it in her face. She got into the automobile feeling rather sober, and tucked herself into the back seat with father and Susan. She wished that Rose would suddenly appear, and then there would be no question as to

what Daddy would do. There was a tremor of the machinery—a jerk—as the big car started. The next moment its wheels were carrying them along so fast that Anne gave up all hope of meeting Rose.

CHAPTER V

THE "ALICE BELL"

"Now, where shall we go?" demanded Mr. Darling.

"Oh, please, please, just take us somewhere—and don't tell us," begged Connie in breathless haste, and then grew rosy because she had not meant to speak first.

Her father laughed. "My children are fond of my haphazard ways of leading. Suppose you take us where you choose, Darling, and we shall be all the better pleased for not knowing where we are going."

"Just as you like—only, if you see a corner ahead that you'd like to turn, say the word and round we'll go."

But, in their different ways, they were all too much absorbed to pay attention to the direction in which they were going. Ellis, on the front seat with Mr. Darling, was getting points on running the big car and making up his mind that some day he should have one like it.

Anne, who had got into the automobile feeling uncomfortable about Rose, and, as she usually did when a stranger was present, rather stiff and shy, began to forget herself. She liked the sensation of flying through the air; the wonderful way in which the powerful car seemed to eat up the miles; the fluttering breeze that cooled her cheeks. This ride, at any rate, would make the day one to be remembered. She was secretly amused and a little exultant, because, after all, her birthday was being celebrated by her forgetful family. She looked absently at the houses which vanished almost as soon as they appeared, and wondered whether this afternoon she should meet anyone who would make a difference in her life. Since Jean Graham had so suddenly become her friend Anne had been on the watch for the unexpected.

"Oo-ouch!" said Susan, prodding Anne out of her dreams by a vigorous use of elbows, "I haven't got 'nuff place to sit. That's two—four—five for you, Connie."

Connie and Jim, who were sitting on the small seats, were playing an exciting game of counting the animals they passed, but it was made difficult by Susan, who tried to keep tab on both sides of the road at once.

"That's better when you're going in a carriage," Connie said, wisely giving up the attempt. "I

know I didn't count half the chickens that belonged to me, 'cause we flew by so fast."

"Susan kept putting me out, but, anyway, it isn't much fun, and when you're doing that you can't see anything else." Jimsey screwed around in his seat and put out his hand to his father; he had moments of sudden affection for his family when nothing sufficed but a touch or a snuggle.

"Happy, son?" queried Mr. Sheldon, squeezing the confiding hand.

"Uh-huh. Why don't you have a car like this, Daddy?"

Mr. Sheldon smiled. "I can think of at least six reasons," he began, and then Anne unconsciously saved him from answering further.

"See that pink and green house!" she exclaimed.

"Where? Where?" questioned Susan and Connie.

"About a quarter of a mile back of us by this time. There wasn't anything special about it except the funny color."

"I want to see the funny pink and green house." Susan's manner was so peremptory that her father frowned unconsciously and answered in haste.

"That one's lost now. You watch for a blue one and tell Anne when you see it. We're getting pretty near salt water, aren't we, Darling? I believe I can smell it."

"Daddy has the most knowing nose," Anne said, and began to sniff at once, for, like her father, she loved the smell of salt water. The next moment they were all sniffing and laughing at each other joyously.

"You're just right, Sheldon. A tidal river comes in not far from here. I was heading for it, but I didn't know it was so near. In a little while your 'knowing nose' will get the shipyard odor. There's a small one in this vicinity, and I thought your young folks might like to see it."

"I should say we would." Ellis was at once appreciative. This was a man after his own heart, this friend of father's, if he could take them into a shipyard.

"I'm not sure that we can get in, but we can try it," Mr. Darling went on. He was driving slowly now and studying the neighborhood. "I wish I knew which one of these roads we're coming to I ought to take," he said thoughtfully.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when a man appeared from around the bend of one of the roads, made a critical survey of the main street in both directions, and when his gaze lighted on their car put up his hand.

"Go straight down this way 'bout a half-mile and then turn to your left. It's only 'bout two minutes after you turn," he called out as Mr. Dar-

ling stopped the car near him. "They told me to watch out for an aut' with red wheels, and, by cricket, there you were jest s'if you'd riz up out of the ground."

Mr. Darling answered his good-natured smile with one just as pleasant. "There might be other autos with red-rimmed wheels," he remarked casually. "Are you sure we're the parties you're looking for?"

"Ain't you huntin' Speed's shipyard?"

"I believe that's the name—it's not one of the big yards—but so far as I know we're not expected."

"You don't say—and red wheels, too. And they told me there would be a young lady in the car." The man nodded at Anne, and was so obviously disappointed that she felt almost sorry she wasn't the young lady for whom he was looking.

"Wal, I guess I'll hev to hang 'round here for awhile," he said with returning cheerfulness. "I thought I'd sure hit it right that time, though."

"Any objection to our driving over there, even if we're not expected?" Mr. Darling asked pleasantly.

"Not's I know of. There's goin' to be a launchin'. A rich old codger from out west's been paying overtime for a fortnit so's he could get his boat off the ways this afternoon. There ain't only

a handful of folks invited, but I guess you can get in. Do no harm to try, anyway."

"We may as well drive around that way," Mr. Darling decided. "We'd take you back with us only I suppose you've got to watch out for another red-wheeled car."

"Have some candy while you wait." Obeying a sudden impulse Anne held out the box of peanut brittle which had been last deposited in her lap. A sense of gay adventure seemed suddenly to take possession of her and lift her out of her usual shyness. "Have another piece—do—that's almost nothing," she urged, when the man's big fingers had politely extracted the smallest morsel he could see.

"You needn't have given away so much, Anne Sheldon," Susan said grumpily as the machine started and went along with increasing speed. "There isn't any more than I—than we want ourselves."

"Oh, piggy," laughed Anne, "I haven't eaten any. He could have my share, couldn't he?"

"You've made him your friend for life; I believe he's smiling yet. Say, this is some adventure, isn't it, Miss Anne?" Mr. Darling twisted around for a second to bestow on her one of his beaming smiles. "I wonder what distinguished party we'll be taken for next."

"Play we're all duchesses and—and things escap-

ing from something awful, and when we get to the shipyard there'll be a boat waiting to—to carry us into safety," proposed Connie, who delighted in games of the imagination.

"I feel just like a duchess or—or a thing," agreed Daddy. "How shall I act, Connie?"

"Well, if you're a duchess," began Connie, not in the least troubled by being laughed at, "you must be very, very haughty and ——"

"Here we are," interrupted Mr. Darling, stopping in front of an opening in the high board fence which concealed the shipyard from the road. "This way for duchesses and things. Next boat leaves at three-thirty for ——" he stopped suddenly, because at this moment a young man who had evidently been waiting just inside the entrance, hurried out and greeted them with enthusiasm.

"This is Mr. M-m-m, isn't it?" No one in the automobile caught the name, because he talked very fast, and, in the middle of the sentence, if one might judge by his sudden expression of pain, evidently bit his tongue. "We were beginning to think the young lady might not get here in time." He smiled sweetly at Anne, who wondered what he could mean, but tried to look responsive, because he was so very pleasant about it.

"We're sorry ——" began Mr. Darling, but the polite stranger interrupted.

"Never mind that now, sir. Delays will happen, of course. Now if you'll all get out and come with me you'll find yourselves very welcome."

Mr. Darling looked at Mr. Sheldon, and then his eye caught Anne's, in which there was an answering twinkle. To her whimsical fancy it was as if he said soundlessly, "I dare you," and for the moment she was not to be dared. This was a real adventure, she was thinking, to be taken for someone else, and waited for, and now to be expected to do something—evidently of importance. Suddenly she found herself stepping out of the automobile.

"That's right," said the talkative young man. "The ladies are taking the lead nowadays. Come right along with—oo-ouch! Pardon *me,*" he went on in a confidential tone to Anne, with whom he had started off as though the other members of the party were of no consequence. "If I've bitten my tongue once this afternoon I've bitten it fifty times, I do believe. I always do that when I get the least bit excited."

Anne, hurrying along in order to keep up with this excitable, tongue-biting person, realized all at once that she was getting too far away from her friends, and stopped short. The adventurous spirit which had spurred her was beginning to cool, and shyness was taking its place. "I—I think we'll

have to explain," she faltered, and walked back a few steps to meet her father, who was hastening to overtake her.

"We really can't let you go any farther, sir, under a misapprehension," Mr. Sheldon was beginning, when a boy about the size of Ellis, who had been running toward them unperceived, broke into the conversation.

"Oh, I say, Mr. Baker, you're making a mistake. We've just had a 'phone from our party, and there's been an accident, and the young lady and her father are both slightly hurt. They can't possibly get here this afternoon."

"B-but you told me their car would have wheels, and—ouch—a young lady with—ouch—red rims," protested the perturbed Mr. Baker, biting his tongue twice in quick succession, and looking at Anne as if she were responsible for it.

"Oh, Baker, you are the limit," said the boy, bursting into a jolly peal of laughter. "But, I say, what are we going to do now? Uncle's heart will be broken unless some girl smashes a bottle of grape juice over that ship when she slides off.

"You see, sir," he added, turning to Mr. Sheldon with a manner that made him seem quite grown-up, "my uncle's been planning for a long time to build a ship, but for the last three years he hasn't been able to get anyone to build for him.

He's very particular about having it properly christened to-day, because to-night we have to ——" a sharp whistle made the boy break off suddenly. "Here's Uncle now," he said in a low tone. "I bet he's all of a frazzle."

The newcomer, who was a tall, thin man with a hooked nose, and piercing dark eyes which seemed to take in the entire group at a glance, came up to them and laid his hand on the boy's shoulder. To her own embarrassment Anne felt herself especially singled out by the keen glance, and involuntarily stepped back a little.

"Well, what are we going to do about it, Archie?" his uncle asked curtly. "There's no time to be lost, you know." He had the air of one who was accustomed to being obeyed, and Anne felt sorry for his nephew.

"That's so," the boy agreed ruefully. "I wonder"—he flashed a glance at Anne—"I wonder"—and then the question came straight—"wouldn't you be willing to do it for us? It would be such a favor."

"I? Oh, I couldn't. I never saw anything of the kind—I don't know what it is, but I'm sure I couldn't." In the misery of her shyness Anne was crowding close to her father, and looking as if she wanted to run away entirely.

"Nothing hard about it," the tall man began

irritably, and then as his eyes rested on Anne his expression changed. She felt that he was almost staring at her, but the next moment a smile took away the sharpness of his face. "It's a fancy of mine to have it named properly," he said quite as if she were the only one concerned. And then—"I beg your pardon, gentlemen; I am Archibald Bradley, and this is my nephew, Archie, and my secretary, Mr. Baker."

Mr. Sheldon introduced Mr. Darling and the Sheldon family, and Mr. Bradley shook hands, beginning with Anne and ending with Susan.

That done, he turned again to Anne, and once more a smile softened his face. "Now, Miss Anne, now that we're all so well acquainted, don't you think you could name my ship for me?"

"Go on; don't be a silly," urged Ellis, in a voice that he intended for a gentle undertone, but which came out as a perfectly audible growl.

Anne gave a quick glance at her father and without a word from him knew what he would like. His expression told her that he sympathized with her shyness, but that it would give him pleasure to have her do as she was asked. Deep within her a fluttering voice said suddenly, "Don't think about yourself." And then, more strongly, "It's all a part of the game, and it's your move."

"Yes, sir, I will," she said, taking a step for-

ward. "That is, if you really think I can do it well enough."

"Of course you can. And now come on." This time Anne and Mr. Bradley were leading the procession, and as soon as they got a little beyond the others he began to talk in a low, eager voice.

"Archie and Baker think I'm a crank about this ship," he said, "but, Miss Anne, I believe you will understand. When I was a little shaver I lived down in Maine, and I used to play with a little girl, the sweetest, dearest girl you can imagine. The best thing we did was sailing boats we made ourselves—she could whittle one out as well as I could, and she was a great deal cleverer about rigging it." Mr. Bradley paused, and Anne looked up with an understanding smile.

"We always used to plan," he went on after a moment, "that when we grew up we should build a real ship and go sailing around the world for the rest of our lives. But that wasn't to be, because she only lived to be fourteen. I've never forgotten her, though, and now—I've built the ship, and it's to be named 'Alice Bell'—for her."

"That's a lovely name," said Anne musingly. "I don't know why, but somehow it makes me think of perfumes and—and spices and delicious fruits."

"Probably she'll carry all of those," answered Mr. Bradley, delighted with her sympathetic understanding of his idea.

"It's beautiful to think of her name sailing around the world as she wanted to do herself." Anne's imaginative soul was charmed by the romance of it all. "And—and sometimes you could go with her."

"Perhaps. Though I'm afraid leisurely journeys are not for me. When I start out I'm in a hurry to get where I'm going. Do you know"—Mr. Bradley's voice became even more confidential, and he was looking at Anne with the same steady stare he had given her at first—"do you know I'm sorry that other girl met with an accident, but I'm mighty glad she didn't get here. It really seems to me that you look a little as I remember Alice Bell. I felt right away that I could tell you about her, and that you would understand. I—I can't talk to everyone about things like that. But here we are ——"

Anne, looking up, saw the huge framework in which the ship had been built, and from which she would glide forth into the water.

"It's too bad we can't all slide off on her," said young Archibald Bradley, taking possession of Anne as his uncle turned away to speak to someone. "Uncle's been hurrying them to the limit,

but they couldn't get her ready for that. She'll go over the other side of the river to be finished. Now come on up these steps to the christening platform."

Anne followed meekly, feeling very shy and strange, but holding fast to the determination not to let anyone know it. It seemed to her like a dream in which she could only do what she was told, and of which she should keep only queer snatches of memory.

"Don't look so scared," Archie said suddenly, much to her confusion, for she had been fancying that to others she was appearing quite at her ease. "There's almost no one here, except your party—only two or three of Uncle's business friends. Oh, I say! I'd almost forgotten. Just wait a second, please."

In her dazed obedience Anne stood rooted to the spot, while Archie dashed away and came back with equal quickness, bearing a large bouquet of pink roses. "There! This was my present for the other girl, so, of course, it belongs to you.

"Now, brace up, and hold 'em as if you weren't afraid of 'em," he went on before she could answer. "I'm going to stand right by you and tell you when it's time to smash. Then all you have to do is to say, 'I christen thee Alice Bell,' and at the same moment break the bottle. Understand?"

Anne nodded, and a faint color came into her cheeks.

"There, that's better. I wish I had my camera. Now look pleasant and wink as often as you please and you'll do very well." Archie grinned at her maliciously, and then stepped aside to make way for his uncle, who was coming to introduce his friends to Anne.

A few minutes later, dazed by this last ordeal, Anne found herself tightly clutching a bottle of grape juice, and wondered how it got there. She smiled faintly at her father, who seemed queerly to fade away from her sight, and she was quite certain that when the fatal moment came she should not be able to move a finger or pronounce a word.

"I want a dwink," Susan said in a loud, clear voice with her eyes fixed upon the bottle in her sister's hand, and when the others laughed, Anne managed to smile, and felt as though the weight which was pressing her down had lifted a trifle. In the next instant she had vowed that she would not disgrace her family by being a silly coward, and with the resolution came still greater relief from the tension of a moment before.

"Get ready," murmured Archie; "they're knocking out the last supports." And a little later, "Now!"

The suppressed force in the word seemed to nerve

"NOW LOOK PLEASANT"

Anne's arm, and she heard a voice, which did not seem to belong to her, say with unexpected strength, "I christen thee, Alice Bell." The next moment, with vision cleared, she watched the smooth downward rush of the ship, which floated on the water as if it knew it belonged there.

Then Daddy's arm went around Anne's shoulders with a quick squeeze, and Ellis walked by her and muttered out of the corner of his mouth, "Good for you, Nan." By this time she began to feel more like herself, and, to her surprise she was able to move and put out her hand when Mr. Bradley and his nephew shook hands with her and thanked her.

"I'm the one to thank you," she said to Archie. "If you hadn't—hadn't exploded that 'now' the way you did I couldn't have moved an inch."

"Oh, yes, you could. You only think you couldn't. Didn't she slide off like a bird, though?"

"Wasn't it wonderful? She seemed to make a bow when she struck the water. Oh, I'm sure no other ship ever did it so beautifully, and I wish I could see it all over again."

"Well, I'm afraid we can't put her back on the ways for your special benefit," laughed the boy, and then his uncle called him, and there was a short conversation which ended in bringing them both back to Anne.

For an instant no one said a word. Then Archie chuckled, and nudged his uncle. "It's up to you, Uncle," he urged, with the chuckle subsiding into a pleased grin.

"I—I wanted to say," began Mr. Bradley, "that I have a little remembrance for the godmother of the 'Alice Bell' which I'm going to ask you to accept." He was fumbling in his pocket, and again his stern, almost sad face had softened into the expression Anne liked.

"Oh, thank you, but that—that would belong to the girl who—who tried to get here and couldn't." In her embarrassment Anne was turning to seek the support of her father's presence, but young Archie caught her by the arm.

"Now don't be foolish," he said impatiently. "Uncle will make it all right with her."

"Of course I shall," Mr. Bradley went on. "And, anyway, Miss Anne, I'm glad you dropped from the skies for our benefit." By this time his pocket had yielded a small leather case, and he was holding it out to Anne. "Please," he said expectantly.

"Of course she will," young Archie affirmed with such confidence that there was nothing left for Anne to do but to take the box and open it.

"Oh, how lovely!" she exclaimed, and looked up at Mr. Bradley with shining eyes. "I never ex-

pected to have a bracelet watch—and such a beauty as this. May I show it to Daddy?"

"Why, bless your heart, of course. It's yours to do what you please with. Only—first"—he took the watch and slipped aside the ribbon band so that Anne could see what was engraved on the back. "Presented by the 'Alice Bell,'" it read, and then the date.

"I shall love to think about the real Alice Bell," Anne said quickly, and just then her father and the children came up and were shown the little watch. Connie snapped it on her sister's wrist, and they all exclaimed over it and admired it.

"I should like a de-ah, darling, cute watch like that," remarked Susan in her sweetest voice. "I saw one in the store for twenty-five cents, only it had a lovely, shiny gold chain, and not an old black wibbon."

"Have one at my expense," said Mr. Darling, presenting her with a bright quarter before her father could protest. Already he had become Susan's willing slave, and she slipped her hand in his with greatest confidence.

"Let's go home—we can wide by that store and get my watch," she demanded.

"But, Susan, it isn't all your party," protested Jim, who had been taking in everything in his usual absorbed fashion. "Now, father, I wish you'd go

over this shipyard with me and tell me all about shipbuilding."

"Some contract," observed Mr. Darling, as they started down the steps. "I hate to hurry you all, but I'm afraid we shall have to continue our travels."

Archie walked between Anne and Ellis on the way back to the automobile. "It must be good fun to have such a big family," he said half-enviously. "I've got just one brother, two years younger, and I don't see much of him. I'm being tutored for college, but I don't know when I shall get there, because my eyes go bad every once in a while."

"I can sympathize," began Anne, and then stopped without explaining further. "We have another sister at home," she added. "I wish you could meet Rose. You'd be sure to like her."

"If she's as nice as the rest of you I know I should," answered the boy, and then it was time for Anne to get into the car, and they started off with much waving of handkerchiefs on the part of the children.

Everyone else talked, but Anne was very quiet all the way home. What she had done this afternoon gave her a new and delightful sense of freedom. "It's just as if I'd been bound with chains and thought I couldn't move," she said to herself.

"And now I *have* moved, and one of the chains is broken." From time to time she put up her wrist to be sure of her new treasure, which had a terrifying way of seeming to be a dream watch.

After a while a soft dusk enveloped them, and lights sprang up here and there. At last the blazing eye of the machine picked out their house from all the rest and came to a stop.

"I'll come some other time, may I, Miss Anne?" Mr. Darling said in his quick way when they were urging him to come in for dinner. "This is such a jolly family—and I haven't any—I'd like to adopt you all."

"We'd love to be adopted," answered Anne, wishing with all her heart she could tell him what a lovely birthday party he had given her. She almost started to say it, but Daddy was close by, and she was afraid he would feel uncomfortable over having forgotten it.

As they entered the house they could hear sounds from the kitchen which meant that Effie was hurrying her preparations for dinner. Rose, coming down the stairs, sat down near the bottom and regarded them with a gloomy and unwelcoming gaze.

"What made you come home at all?" she asked sulkily.

"Why—why, we couldn't stay away forever," responded the literal Connie.

"Oh, we've had such a glorious time!" Anne exclaimed with so much animation that Rose stared at her in amazement. "My, but that dinner smells good!" she went on, "and I'm so hungry I could—why, what's this?" she went over to look at a letter on the hall-table. "Miss Anne—it's from Aunt Lucia—I thought she wouldn't forget my ——" she stopped short and looked at her father guiltily.

"Your what?" he demanded, and then, "Anne Sheldon, is this your birthday? Of course it is—and you know I never can remember birthdays. You bad child, why didn't you warn me so that we could have a party and a present?"

"Well, haven't we had a party and a present?" laughed Anne. "Come on out to supper, and we'll tell Rose all about it."

Rose listened without enthusiasm, and had only grudging praise for the little watch which her sister held out for her inspection, and gradually this chilly atmosphere dimmed Anne's happiness a little.

"Well, I wish you had been there," she said in a last effort to dispel Rose's sulkiness. "I told Archie about you. Probably they would have asked you to christen the boat instead of me—and you would have done it much better, I'm sure."

"I suppose they would have asked me," Rose answered with such unmistakable self-appreciation

that Ellis stopped short in taking a drink of cocoa, put down his cup and glared at her.

"Well, of all conceit," he growled. "I want you to understand that no one could have done it better than Anne, and she looked perfectly corking, too."

"And did you see, Daddy," Jimsey, who had finished supper and had come to stand by his father, broke into the conversation eagerly—"did you see how the sunshine came down and danced on the bottle and made Anne's hair look all glittery?"

"Yes, my artistic son, I noticed all that." Mr. Sheldon put his arm around the boy and drew him closer.

"I'm your arkistick son, too," clamored Susan, running to the shelter of her father's other arm, "and I thought Anne smiled vewy pwetty. She looked just like this." Susan distorted her chubby features in so funny an attempt to imitate her sister that everyone laughed except Rose.

"We were all very proud of a certain member of our family, weren't we?" Father looked across the table with a smile for Anne, whose eyes were shining.

"Well, I think you might have stopped at Edna's for me," snapped Rose. "I s'pose Anne wouldn't let you because I went off this morning."

Anne opened her mouth to protest, but her father

put up his hand. "On the contrary, it was entirely my fault that you weren't called for, Rose," he said pleasantly. "I'll talk that over with you after supper, and tell you exactly what Anne and I did say on the subject."

CHAPTER VI

A BOX BY EXPRESS

NOVEMBER returned to cold dreariness, and armed itself with gray skies and biting winds up to the very gateway of December. Anne decided that it was twice as hard to go over the small, monotonous tasks of every day when it made one shiver just to look at the sky; and she found the daily walks she had been bidden to take anything but a pleasure. Nevertheless, even now she could walk much farther without being tired than she could at first, and, as to the irksome duties, the little watch on her wrist seemed to tick into her mind that she had conquered herself once and could again.

This afternoon was a particularly trying one, for after a day or two of crisp December sunshine it was raining hard. The street was filled with puddles and the gutters were rushing rivers. Rose, in a big chair by the window in the living-room, was gazing out dismally. She had taken cold in a tooth

and her face was somewhat swollen, but as the pain had almost entirely left her, she was feeling cross over having to stay in the house.

"Man!" shrieked Susan. "That counts three for me." She and Jimsey had their noses against the other window, and were counting the passers-by, the one who could say man—woman—child—or auto first and loudest, adding to his score.

"Don't yell so, Susan." Rose was wondering irritably why Anne stayed out of the room so long, and wishing that it were time for Ellis and Connie to come from school. She looked at the clock and found to her dismay that only ten minutes had gone since she last studied its face, and that it was now just about to strike three.

"Anyone here who could possibly eat anything?" demanded Anne, coming into the room at that moment with a dish of popcorn, white, fluffy, and beautiful to behold.

Susan and Jim made a dash for it, but Rose looked at her sister with reproachful eyes. "Oh, Anne, when you know I can't chew," she said crossly, "and I'm so hungry."

"You poor thing! I forgot," confessed Anne. "I'll fix some kind of a drink for you. Will the malted milk do this time?"

"Ugh! I s'pose so." Rose's manner was ungraciousness itself. "I don't see why you had to

bring in that luscious-looking corn, though. Those children make me tired crunching it."

"It was just plain stupid of me," Anne agreed remorsefully. "I'm always doing something I think is nice and then finding it isn't at all."

"You are nice," comforted Susan, scattering white kernels in her wake, as she crossed the room to fling herself on her sister. "I—I like you vewy much—sometimes."

"Oh, Susan! Now don't tread that into the rug." Rose spoke out sharply. "We all know how you love us when we do things for you. Do hurry, Anne. I feel as if I hadn't had anything to eat for a million years."

"Would you like to have the children take their corn into the dining-room?" asked Anne, pausing at the door.

"No, it's dismal enough here without being all alone. I can't think of a thing to do."

Anne, departing to the kitchen, wished vainly that some of the other members of her family liked reading as well as she did. It would make it easier to get along with them.

She found Effie making chocolate frosting, and with sudden inspiration, begged a little of the melted chocolate and added it to the malted milk. "Anyone gets tired of the same old thing, so I thought I'd put a new taste in it," she remarked as

she started off with the cup. If she could have seen the smile that Effie bestowed upon her back Anne would have realized that one person in the house appreciated her efforts.

"That wasn't so bad," Rose conceded with a yawn, after she had sipped her chocolaty drink. "How soon do you suppose I'll be able to eat anything really decent? Isn't this the most awful old day you ever saw?"

The rain was blowing against the window in gusts, blurring the landscape. The few going by looked drenched and uncomfortable, and were huddled under umbrellas which it was a struggle to hold.

"Express!" shouted Jim, thereby making quite an increase in his score, for expresses counted ten.

"You talk too quick," Susan fretted. "O-oh! the man's getting out. He's going to come here."

Rose gazed eagerly from her window, and Anne came from the other side of the room, but, though the man peered into the back of the machine until Susan's excitement rose to boiling pitch, all he unearthed was a parcel for the big house on the other side of the street.

"He didn't ought to stop on our side if he can't bwing us anything," Susan mourned.

"Silly! He had to. He was coming that way," said Jimsey. "Now watch out, or I'll get the next count."

Rose looked disappointed. "Just for a minute I hoped it might be Auntie Dexter's box; it's about time for Geraldine to be outgrowing her dresses," she murmured. She was still staring at the occasional passer-by, at the splashing rain and wind-shaken trees.

"I'd forgotten all about that box," Anne answered. "Now that Aunt Lucia's gone what are we going to do with the things that don't fit?"

"Why, have a dressmaker, of course. Or pinch 'em in in some places and let 'em out in others. I believe I could manage it if you'd let me do it my way." Rose's eyes grew bright with anticipation—then clouded again. "Horrors! Suppose she doesn't send it this year! Perhaps they've been economical like everyone else and have worn out their clothes. I like Geraldine's taste, too, and I don't mind stepping into her dresses."

"I should say not, when they fit you as well as hers do. I wonder if we could get Miss Pennyfeather to ——"

The rest of Anne's remark was drowned out by an excited shout from Susan. "Auto! Five for me!"

"There goes Miss Airy," Rose said, looking across the street where an automobile had just driven in. "The girls call her that because she has such an airy way of walking. Well, will you look!

The chauffeur carried her right into the house. I suppose she can't be allowed to wet even the soles of her shoes. The girls think she's an awful snob."

"How do they know? Have they ever spoken to her?" questioned Anne.

"No-o. But you can tell something about a girl if she always goes 'round in an auto, and dresses better than the other girls, and never deigns even to nod to us. She might just as well wear a placard—'Keep off! I am rich!'"

Anne looked troubled. "I think it's perfectly horrid to say that when you don't know anything about her," she said slowly. She remembered that she herself had jumped to the conclusion that her opposite neighbor was a lucky girl who could have everything she wanted.

"Anne and I went 'wound in an auto, and we don't have to wear cards 'cause we're wich," remarked Susan, who always heard what others didn't want her to hear.

"You wouldn't," Rose retorted dryly. "There'll never be any danger that anyone in this family will have to wear a placard for that reason. Oh, I do wish we had more money, and could live in a big house like that, and have an automobile, and all the clothes we want."

"Yes, but ——" began Anne.

"Oh, I know what you're going to say, Nan,"

Rose interrupted. "Almost every time I've wanted to spend a cent since Aunt Lucia went away you've told me that Daddy couldn't afford it. It's all very well for you, because you don't care for clothes nor how you look."

"Don't I?" A red spot burned in Anne's cheek, and a dozen things she wanted to say struggled for utterance. Then she cooled down. "Anyway, I have to wear them; and I need pretty ones to make me look better."

"That's so," agreed Rose, disconcertingly frank as usual. "But I don't believe you love 'em as much as I do, and that makes it harder for me."

"There's Connie," exclaimed Susan. "What's she looking at? Something on the gwound."

They could all see Connie stoop and pick up something. Then she ran around to the back door. Three minutes later, having taken off raincoat and rubbers, she came into the living-room bearing a small bedrabbled bunch of yellow fur.

"It's a lost kitten," she announced. "I'm going to give him some milk and pet him and love him till I can find his owner. School let out early 'cause it's such a storm."

"Another kitten! And Flaxy's such a mischief I can hardly stand her." Anne was sorry as soon as the words were out, for Connie was a dear, and she loved the troublesome Flaxy.

"You wouldn't have me leave a poor little wet thing like this out on the sidewalk, would you?" Connie's brown eyes held deep disapproval. "And you can tell he's somebody's pet. Look at this ribbon."

Under Connie's manipulation the ribbon, which at first sight had seemed hardly more than a wet string, had proved that it once was a soft, wide, orange satin bow tied into a collar which was almost hidden under the thick fur.

"Here's a name." Rose had turned the collar until a small marker had come into view. "'Goldie.' Matches the color, doesn't it?"

"Goldie, where do you live?" demanded Connie, looking at the kitten as if she expected name of street and the number to issue from its little mouth.

In time of stress Susan always yearned to be helpful, so now she tried to solve this problem. "P'waps it b'longs," she began slowly, "p'waps it b'longs to ——" she searched her memory for a probable name, and then, realizing that nobody was paying the slightest attention to her, made up her mind to startle them. "B'longs to Miss Aiwy," she ended explosively.

"Susan Sheldon, don't you ever let me hear you say that again." Rose was out of her chair in an instant and had her small sister by the shoulders. "Promise me, Susan, that you won't."

"*You* did," Susan muttered with a jerk and a frown. "P'waps it might come wight out of my mouf sometime."

"I know I said it, and I'm sorry." Rose came straight to the point as she almost always did. "I'll promise not to say it again. Now, won't you—please?"

"I'll twy," Susan answered, not too graciously.

"I think I'll get this kitten all dry and warm," Connie observed peaceably, "and then I'll see if I can find his home."

"Think again," said Rose, not waiting for Anne to answer. "You don't suppose you're going to be allowed out in this storm. I should say not."

"Then I'll have to keep him over till to-morrow, and if Flaxy comes into the room—well, good-night."

Connie's giggle was irresistible, and in spite of her gloom Rose managed a one-sided smile. Tired of sitting in the chair by the window she went over to the couch now, stopping on the way to look at the clock. "Did you ever see such a long afternoon?" she demanded fretfully. "Only quarter of four. This must be slow. What time is it by your watch, Nan?"

Anne pushed up her sleeve and looked at her little watch with great affection. "I'm three min-

utes faster than that." She was glad that she need not say slower, for then Rose would declare that none of those wrist watches kept good time.

"Only three minutes," sighed Rose, curling up on the couch and regarding her family with eyes that slowly grew pleasanter. Connie and the two youngsters were on the floor, still occupied with the kitten; Anne was turning the hem of a napkin and looking as if she did not particularly enjoy her task.

"Like to do that, Nannie?" Rose asked, feeling a certain admiration for anyone who would pluckily stick to work which was evidently distasteful.

"Not a bit. But the doctor doesn't want me to sew, and Effie says she doesn't mind the sewing if the hem is turned. It's hard, though, to get it just to suit her."

"I s'pose anyone would have to make nice polite little stitches," Rose went on, "and there'd be millions of them. Oh, I never could sit still long enough, even if I did want to be an angel and help. Anyway, there's one thing in your favor: your hands look nice when you're doing it. I've just discovered, Nancy, that you have rather pretty hands."

The unexpected compliment made Anne drop her work and stare at her outspread hands as though they were strangers to her.

"Goosey! Didn't you ever see 'em before?" Rose chuckled. "They're the best-looking hands in the family, though Ellis has good ones—when he keeps them clean. I know what's what in hands, because one of the teachers gave me an awful going-over the other day. She said it was a disgrace to me to bite my nails, because my hands would be shapely—please notice that beautiful word—if the finger-tips were what they should be."

"Why don't you try to stop biting them, then?" Anne's attention seemed to be riveted on her work. "It's rather fun to see what you can make yourself do."

"Too much bother," yawned Rose, but in spite of her apparent indifference, her eyes followed her sister's fingers with a fascinated gaze as they pinched and pulled and creased. Anne had changed somehow, she told herself. She wondered just what it was that made her seem different. Anyway, it was a becoming change—and that meant a great deal to Rose.

"There! Isn't he a darling?" Connie held up the kitten for approval.

"Let's bring Flaxy in and see what'll happen," suggested Jimsey, who yearned for excitement this dull afternoon.

"Indeed I shall not. How would you like it, Jim Sheldon, if you were a perfect stranger in

someone's house and they brought in a big boy to fight you?"

"Oh, I'd like it all right." Jimsey turned away, in spite of himself, from Connie's indignant gaze. "I should think you'd be kinder, though, if you gave that kitten something to eat, 'stead of fussing so much 'bout how it looks," he went on, feeling that he had turned the tables rather neatly.

"I forgot. I meant to ask Effie for some milk right away." Connie, looking conscience-stricken, jumped up from the floor and with the kitten in her arms sped into the kitchen. A moment later she was back, her eyes wide with excitement.

"Effie says the expressman brought a box to the back door just after I came in," she said breathlessly. "She had him leave it in the playroom, and she thinks we'd better open it there. And I'm most sure it's Auntie Dexter's box."

"But I'm afraid it's too cold in the playroom for Rose," Anne objected.

"No, it isn't." Connie danced up and down in her impatience. "Effie made a fire there right away, and it's warm already. And while she waited she loosened the cover of the box."

"Hurrah for Effie! She's a peach!" exclaimed Rose, scrambling off the couch in a hurry.

Instantly something inside of Anne's mind said, "Tell Effie that." Therefore as they poured

through the kitchen into the playroom, she stopped to squeeze Effie's plump arm and murmur gratefully, "Rose says you're a peach, and I think so, too."

"There's others," responded Effie, with a slow, significant smile.

CHAPTER VII

MISS AIRY

Some years before this a physician had lived in the house, and had built an office opening into the garden, and connected by a driveway with the street. This room had always been used by the Sheldons as a playroom for the children, and was furnished to meet their needs. There was a shabby couch, and a scarred table, which, sticky in places, proclaimed itself no stranger to paste; the battered chairs looked comfortable, and the screened fireplace sent out a warm, rosy glow.

"It's a shame Ellis isn't here. He always likes to see us open the box." Connie had deposited the kitten and a saucer of milk in a corner of the room, and was giving him some parting advice before devoting herself to the joy of seeing the box unpacked.

"I suppose we might wait for Daddy and Ellis," Anne began hesitatingly, but Rose put a quick veto on the suggestion.

"This is the first pleasant thing that's happened

for a hundred years, and I'm not going to wait a minute," she said with decision.

The cover of the box stuck a little, in spite of Effie's labors, and by the time it was fairly off, Ellis poked his head into the room with the question, "What's doing?" And then with a quick glance at the box, "Latest and chick-est styles got here?"

"Only the near-latest," murmured Rose, whose eyes were riveted on something in a wonderful shade of blue, which couldn't at this moment be lifted out without disturbing the general arrangement of things.

"Well, this is no place for a hard-working little student, and those thingamajigs don't concern me. I'm off," remarked Ellis, and at the same time came as close as he could get to the box, attracted by a carefully done-up package which lay at the top, and looked as if it ought to have his name on it.

The Dexter box was always packed with great judgment, for invariably the packer put at the top something for the two youngest children. Usually there was a book for Ellis, who, not caring much for reading, failed to be enthusiastic over his gift and growled at having to write his note of thanks. This time the package did not look like a book, and Ellis eyed it with some curiosity, all the time trying to appear indifferent.

"This belongs to you, Susan, and this is for

James Dexter Sheldon. They always call you James, don't they?" Anne handed over a package of irregular shape to Susan and a large square one to Jim. "Now this one's for you, Ellis."

It was a soft, crushable package, and Ellis regarded it with suspicion. "You don't mean they've sent me anything, do you?" he said, and flattered himself that the others had been too busy looking out treasures for themselves to realize that his eye had been upon this from the beginning.

"Hear the innocent lad," Rose said scornfully. "Darling brother, we knew we couldn't drive you away from this box till you got your little present. Now don't be so slow about opening it. O-oh, those are stunning gloves! And that's a peachy muffler. They must think you're quite grown up."

That same thought had flashed through the mind of her brother, and he was thereby much gratified, but all he said was, "They are rather neat, aren't they? Guess I'll try the muffler."

"That means we shan't get a chance at the mirror for some time, Nancy," flashed Rose.

"See! Mine's a little doll—and a lot of pieces to make dwesses for her—and a thimble—and scissors—and needle-book and a white spool and ——"

"Goodness! That's lovely, Susan." Anne, feeling very gay and happy, turned again to the box. "Now the next package is marked, 'For my

god-daughter, Constance Dexter Sheldon,'" and Anne lifted a large soft package and laid it in its owner's outstretched arms.

"Who owns that high-sounding name?" demanded Ellis from the mirror.

"Why, *I* do," Connie answered innocently.

"Oh, Connie, you lamb! Did you think the gloves had gone to his brain? Come here, Ellis, and see Connie's spick and span new dress." Anne was as pleased as if the pretty mixture of plaid and plain was her own.

Connie, who was reading the note pinned to the dress, looked up to say in an awed voice, "She says it's thirteen-year-old size."

"Well, you need it, you young giant," said Rose. "Come on, Anne. We shan't draw any new clothes, but I guess it's up to us to divide the rest of the things. I don't mind if they're not new so long as nobody knows it except us."

"I don't mind if someone does know," Anne remarked with a spirited air that made Rose look at her in astonishment. "Old Anne's getting too spunky for words these days," was her inward comment, and then she turned her whole attention to the box.

It was the habit of the two older girls to draw for first choice, and then to select things by turn. This method was very much to Rose's advantage,

as she very well knew, for Anne, hating her own red hair, was inclined to choose only dull and inconspicuous shades, thus making it possible for Rose to have the prettiest things without seeming selfish.

It was part of the plan to take the dresses out of the box, and hang them over chairs without making any remarks about them or expressing a preference. Rose was a stickler for this part of the program, and though the blue velveteen coat and skirt which came out first brought desire into her eyes, and made her feel herself its probable owner, she said not a word, only hung it with a loving touch on the best-looking chair she could find.

There followed in quick succession a long brown coat, a plaid skirt in browns and yellows and black, two waists, one rather nicer than the other and evidently for the blue suit, and a dress of a dull soft green. Two packages, much wrapped in tissue paper, proved to be small velvet hats in blue and brown, and the last thing to be taken out was a box.

Connie, who had laid aside her own treasure and had been looking on with her hand over her mouth, squealed with excitement when there was disclosed a party frock of figured voile with dainty touches of blue velvet ribbon. "Oh, me, oh, my," she cried, forgetting the discipline of previous years, "won't that be becoming to ——"

"Sh!" Rose said sharply, quite conscious that she knew to whom it would be most becoming. She was just wishing that the ribbon on the party dress and the velvet of the suit weren't so nearly alike in color when Ellis came toward her with two strips of paper in his hand. "Anne says you're to draw for first choice; long one wins."

Rose drew, and Ellis, with a grin, showed the longer one still in his hand.

"You're first, Nan," Rose said, feeling vaguely that perhaps things weren't going her way to-day.

"I'll take the blue suit, then," announced Anne without a moment's hesitation.

"D-do you th-think it will be as becoming to you as the brown?" stammered Rose, startled out of her calmness.

"Ye-es." Anne's voice was not so assured now, for it was easy to see how much her sister wanted the blue. But the brown would be just as becoming to Rose. And she herself loved that shade of blue and had a sudden fancy that a suit like that would be something to live up to. One would have to be very gracious and friendly and entertaining to be becoming to the suit, she told herself whimsically. And father had said something about the blue of her old wrapper bringing out the color of her eyes. "Yes, I think it will be more becoming to me than the brown," she said at last firmly.

"All right." Rose's voice was a trifle subdued, but her spirits rose again as her eye fell on the pretty voile. "I'll take this," she said, holding it up in front of her before the mirror, but turning away with a frown because the picture was so much less satisfying than usual. "Goodness knows, though, when I'll have a chance to wear it."

"Now I can say how becoming that'll be to Rose, can't I?" ventured Connie, gazing at the delicate colors with shining eyes.

"I'll take the green dress for second choice," Anne decided.

"I thought you would, and I don't care. That brown coat with the plaid skirt is rather stylish, after all, and, of course, those browns and yellows do go all right with my hair and eyes." Rose prided herself on being a good sport, and often was. "Now I wish you hadn't scared me out of getting those brown boots—I s'pose they'd be half worn-out by this time, though. Anyway, it's perfectly goluptious for us each to have a waist and hat to go with the suit. I hate looking like a crazy quilt."

Anne laughed, and secretly felt relieved to have Rose take her new assertiveness so well. "If they'll only fit," she said, stroking the velveteen jacket half shyly and loving the color.

"Aren't you going to try on this afternoon?" Connie asked hopefully.

"Not if I know myself," Rose answered. "Do you think I want to decide whether anything is becoming to me when my cheek is blown up like a balloon?"

"I'll ask Daddy to-night if we may have Miss Pennyfeather come soon to make the things right for us," Anne said. "And now I am going to clear up this muss and then pop some corn for Daddy. He likes it, and he'll be so tired and wet when he comes home." As the easiest way to carry it she set the little blue hat on her head and started to take one of the dresses.

"Here! That's no way to wear it." Rose pulled the little hat down over her sister's forehead, jerked it lower on one side, coaxed from beneath it some gleaming locks—"There, now you've got some style about you." She dragged Anne across the room to the mirror, thereby dislodging Ellis, who had tired of admiring himself in his new muffler and gloves, and as a recent touch, had added the brown velvet hat, which was perched coquettishly over one ear.

"Selfish, conceited girls! You don't allow anything to us men." He strode over to the door and held back the heavy curtain. "It's dark as pitch. Jiminy! That's thunder, or I miss my guess.

Would you believe it? A thunder-shower in December. You can't see your hand before your face."

He dropped the portière again, but had barely crossed the room when they all heard somebody scrambling up the steps, a piteous, breathless cry, and then a thud as of someone falling against the door.

It seemed to Anne that Rose and Ellis did not hesitate at all, but she felt herself trembling and realized that she was backing toward the kitchen. Jimsey's hand, slipped into hers, steadied her, and with an effort she got control of herself and reached the door just as Ellis pulled it open.

There was nothing to be afraid of, for the person lying against it fell quietly into the room, and lay there, drenched and limp, with small white face upturned, and quite unconscious of anything going on about her.

"It's just a child," Rose said. "She's probably scared to death by the thunder. Put her up on the couch, Ellis." Rose had been taking first-aid lessons in the last two months, and she felt a secret satisfaction at having the chance to show what she could do in an emergency. She started to help lift the child, but Ellis waved her aside.

"She isn't heavy enough to need two," he said, and as he laid the poor little girl on the couch, he

felt suddenly larger and stronger, and as though he were made to take care of small, helpless things.

"No pillow, Anne. Lay her flat—don't crowd around, children, she needs air. Get some water—someone." Rose gave her orders as if she had all her life been used to taking care of people who had fainted.

Anne, full of admiration for her sister's capacity, and still somewhat shaky, was glad to run to the kitchen for water, and came back in a minute, followed by Connie, who was volubly explaining that Effie was not in the kitchen.

"Never mind. We don't need her." Rose sprinkled a little water in the girl's face, and was relieved to see some signs of returning consciousness. There was a faint change in the pallor of the small face, which looked all the whiter for the short, dark curls that surrounded it.

"She isn't much bigger as I are," declared Susan, squeezing her way in from behind Ellis and Anne, and almost falling on the couch in her endeavor to get near.

"Keep back, Susan," Rose began sharply, but stopped, because just at this instant the girl on the couch gasped and shivered, half-opened her eyes, and said faintly, "Goldie."

"She wants her kitten." Connie was across the room and back again in a moment with the suddenly

awakened kitten in her arms. "Here he is—here's Goldie," she murmured, quite as if she were comforting a baby. "He's per-fectly all right."

"I—I thought he would be killed," said the girl with a little whimper in her voice which made them all think she was going to cry. She cuddled the kitten closely to her and lay with closed eyes until a little strength and a more natural color came back. Then, to their relief, she looked up with an attempt at a smile.

"Silly, isn't it, to care so much about a kitten?" she half-whispered. There was a quirk of her eye in the direction of Ellis, as though she felt boys could be depended upon to think foolish almost anything a girl might do. Then as if she saw him clearly for the first time, her lips curved into a real smile which became a faint gurgle of laughter. "Oh, excuse me, but you do look funny," she said chokingly.

With one movement Ellis tore the velvet hat from his head and deposited it not too carefully on the table. His face grew red and he smiled painfully. In his mind he was saying, "Great Scott! You couldn't get cross with a poor little thing like that who looked like a drenched white kitten herself." He was deeply grateful to Connie when she came to the rescue in her usual, efficient way.

"We don't think it's silly a bit," she observed. "We all like cats and dogs, and Goldie is such a dear."

"He's a wretch," murmured the girl, "always trying to run away. I couldn't get anyone else to come, so I slipped out myself when no one was looking." Her voice was stronger now, but she was still somewhat breathless. "I didn't dream of getting so far as this, though."

"Your hair is sopping wet," Rose said, wondering from how far she had come to get so drenched as this. "Turn the couch so that her hair will get some heat from the fire, Ellis—there, not too close—and, Con, you get a towel and dry it as much as you can." Rose was in her element: she did not like to give personal service, but she enjoyed telling others what to do.

"I didn't expect to go farther than the front piazza," the girl continued, "so I just slipped on a coat. But I kept thinking I heard Goldie crying, and I went on and on—and the storm grew so much worse—so dark, and the thunder ——" she shivered and shut her eyes for a moment as if the memory of it still frightened her. "And all of a sudden your light came—and went again. I should have fainted out there in the rain if I hadn't seen this door."

"That was Ellis pulling back the portière to look

at the storm," explained Connie. "Wasn't it wonderful he should do it just at that minute? He really saved your life, didn't he?"

"Oh, come off," growled Ellis involuntarily. He had been hovering on the outer edge of the group, intending to go upstairs, but finding it impossible to tear himself away. Now, pulled into prominence by Connie's remark, he vowed that he would go this time and took several steps toward the door.

"Perhaps you don't know where you are now," Anne said quickly. "This is Finley Street, and we're the Sheldons."

"I ought to know," the girl answered. "I've been watching you for the last six weeks. You're Anne, aren't you? I think I've heard the others calling you that. I live across the street. I'm Roberta Brent."

As Anne said afterward, if she had announced that she was a princess they couldn't have been more surprised. They had had only such fleeting glimpses of her before. For an instant blank silence fell upon the little group, and then Connie, always helpful in a crisis, asked calmly, "Do I hurt you rubbing your head so hard?"

"Not a bit. Your fingers are as soft as velvet," Roberta Brent answered with a little laugh. "Please keep on. Nothing would tempt me to

move yet. And—and now that I'm here I'd like to get a little acquainted with you all."

"Shan't we telephone to your house? Won't they be anxious about you?" asked Anne, still a little bewildered by the idea that this girl, who by her own words had come so far, should be their opposite neighbor.

"Oh, not this very minute," pleaded the girl. "Mother and my governess are in town, and the maids won't bother to see whether I'm in my room, because I got so furious with them about Goldie. Someone might telephone the chauffeur in about a quarter of an hour, if you'll let me stay as long as that. You don't know how good it seems to me to be with some real girls," she ended with a wistful catching of her breath.

"Of course you may stay as long as you will. We'd love to have you." Anne, who was trying to cultivate a hospitable manner, surprised even herself by the cordiality of her tone. She felt that she must talk fast in order to cover up the noticeable way in which Rose had retired to the background ever since their guest had announced where she lived.

By this time Connie had dried the curly hair, which stood out fluffily around the small colorless face, making it look even smaller. To Anne's quick fancy, the girl on the couch, with her cloudy

hair and dark, dancing eyes, looked like a wood-nymph or a water-pixy who had found her way among humans and was intensely curious about them.

"Your shoes must be soaking wet," she said, becoming practical after this flight of her imagination. "Let me take them off and dry them."

"Oh, no," demurred Roberta, drawing her feet farther under her skirt. "I can change as soon as I get home." She had turned on her side and was curled up like a kitten with her bright eyes taking in the room and its occupants.

"You weren't going out in this storm, were you? That little hat is awfully becoming to you," she said suddenly to Anne, who for the first time realized that she was still wearing the blue hat just as Rose had jammed it upon her head.

"Why—why I'd forgotten I had it on," stammered Anne, feeling the old shyness steal over her. Then, as if she had pushed aside something that was in her way, she said gaily, "I don't even know how it looks on me. I was just going to admire myself when you ——"

"When I fell up the steps," Roberta Brent interrupted. "Well, believe me, it's just perfect for you. What were you all doing, anyway, when I broke up the party?" she went on in her friendly way, her gaze resting for the moment on Rose.

"Has the dressmaker been sending home a whole boxful of new dresses? That little voile is a darling."

"No-o," faltered Rose, crimson in her distress. In her heart was rebellion against the cruel fate which, on this particular afternoon, had sent into their midst this girl who could have everything she wanted—and have it new. Suddenly Roberta's questioning face made her realize that she must say something; if she didn't Connie would, or, worse still, Susan.

She moistened her dry lips, but before she could utter a word, Anne, who used to be tongue-tied in an emergency, was talking in a perfectly easy way to the girl on the couch, and smiling at her as though she had known her always.

"It wasn't the dressmaker," she was saying, and Rose felt herself stiffen in preparation for what must come next; "it was a very dear friend of our mother, Connie's godmother, in fact. She sends us a box every year. We thought it was jolly to have it come this stormy day, especially when poor Rose has been half-sick with a cold in her tooth."

Rose relaxed in her chair and tried to smile, though she knew it must make her look foolish. How had Anne been able to do a thing of this kind so beautifully? She had told everything it was necessary to tell, and ——

"I wish Gewaldine's dwesses would fit me," came distinctly from the corner where Susan and Jim had again ensconced themselves with their presents.

"Who's Geraldine? Her doll?" questioned Roberta, while Rose braced herself anew, waiting for the next blow to fall.

"Bring your doll over here, Susan," Anne said quickly. "I didn't have time really to look at it when it came out of the box And I don't know even yet what Jimsey had."

It was a bold move, but it worked. Jim came shyly, and Susan with all confidence to show their gifts, and in admiring the latter's skill as a dressmaker, and marvelling over the wonderful results to be obtained with Jim's building-construction toy, the name of Geraldine was happily lost.

Rose sighed with relief and wiped her forehead when no one was looking. Presently Jim went back to his corner, but Susan lingered, watching Roberta with bright inquisitive eyes.

"Why do you think it's such a long way over here fwom your house?" she demanded with a suddenness that made the girl on the couch jump. "I could take one—two—fwee steps and I'd be there."

"Why, I"—Roberta laughed nervously—"it does seem to me that it's a long way. You see, I—I'm sure I should have to take at least five or six steps." It seemed to Anne that she had

started to say something else, and she wondered why she should be embarrassed over so simple a question.

"You hair's lovely and soft and thick," Connie observed, smoothing the pretty head softly.

"It's the only good-looking thing about me." Roberta gave her rebellious curls a pat, and then, with a laugh, caught at Susan's hand which was travelling slyly about her neck. "O-oo! You tickle. What are you up to, Miss Mischief?"

"Where do you keep the wich card?" Susan demanded. "I want to see it."

"Witch card! What does she mean by that?" Roberta Brent, looking around questioningly, met only Connie's honest eyes which gazed into her own in all innocence.

"I'm sure I don't know," laughed Connie, who had no clue to Susan's mysterious behavior. She thought it was all very amusing and was about to question her small sister, but happening to glance at Rose and Anne, the words died on her lips. She knew then that something dreadful had happened or was about to happen.

"Why, don't you know—the wich card?" Susan persisted, impatience in her tone.

By this time Anne was beginning to get hold of herself again, and she realized that if she did not save the situation no one would. "Susan, I want

to have a secret with you," she said enticingly, and without waiting for an answer, put her arm around her sister, and by some miracle got her out of the room without the struggle which usually attended such a performance.

Three minutes later she came back alone bearing a tray on which there were a steaming glass and a plate of wafers. "It's grape juice," she explained, "made from our own grapes. I thought it would be good for you to have something hot before you went out."

"It's delicious." Roberta sipped it slowly, and daintily nibbled a wafer. "And did you find out what Susan meant by 'witch card'?" she inquired curiously.

"I didn't ask her." Anne was calmness itself now. "She's in the kitchen helping Effie make biscuits."

Rose unconsciously breathed such an evident sigh of relief that Anne was sure their guest must hear it, but she was listening instead to a sound from outside.

"That's Ben's horn," she said; "he must be out front. I wonder if your brother would tell him to back into the driveway and come to this door."

"Of course that would be better," Anne answered, and went, herself, to speak to the chauffeur.

When she got back to the playroom Roberta was sitting up and looking paler and a little dizzy from the effort of moving.

"Now prepare to hear me scolded," she said, making a little face as the man came up the steps and knocked.

Connie opened the door, and, to their surprise, he walked into the room and straight over to the couch where Roberta sat looking at him with a rueful smile.

"Oh, Miss Bobby, child, how could you?" he asked reproachfully. "You should have sent for me to find the little beast." While he talked he was unfolding a light robe, and now he wrapped it around his little mistress, and lifted her with the kitten in her arms from the couch.

"Good-by," she said brightly, waving her hand as she was borne across the room. "Thank you so much for taking care of me, and please all come to see me—'specially you, Anne, because you don't go to school."

"I will," Anne responded. "And you come soon to see us. Run over any time."

"Wait a minute, Ben," Miss Bobby said with a laugh which seemed to have mistaken itself for a sob. Her dark eyes were suspiciously soft, but the next moment her voice was as gay as ever.

"I'm afraid I can't promise to 'run over,'" she

was smiling gallantly, "because I'm a little lame, and Ben has had to be my horse since I was eight. That's why it seemed so far to me. But I shall come often. Now I've found you you can't get rid of me. Good-by," and before they could say anything Ben had departed into the darkness.

As the machine rolled away from the door, Anne caught her breath quickly. "Wasn't it wonderful of her to wait till just before she got out of the house so that we needn't have to answer?"

"My goodness!" Rose exploded. "I'm thankful she has clothes and autos and chauffeurs and—and everything else they can give her. I wish I'd said right pop-off these dresses were—were hand-me-downs—I wish I'd kept in the light so she could see how horrid I look—I wish ——"

"You silly," Anne said softly. "Was that why you were so quiet and wouldn't help me out of any of the troubles Susan got us into?"

"The little wretch! Of course it was my fault, though, in the first place. To think I should ever talk about her in that way." Rose's humility was genuine and unusual. "But you were a wonder, Nan. How did you make yourself speak up and get us out of the fix each time?"

"Oh, I don't know." Anne stood for a thoughtful moment with a little smile flickering about her

lips. "Perhaps it was because it seemed to be my move," she said at last, and walked away, leaving Rose to wonder, as she often did nowadays, what under the sun had come over old Anne.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ATTIC

ANNE had finished the other beds and was making her father's. She liked bed-making better than dusting, but, as she told herself, that wasn't saying much. Nevertheless, she had a certain pride, especially when she was making father's bed, in tucking the clothes in tight at the foot, and not having any wrinkles in the bottom sheet, and in shaking the pillows so that they stood up with a highly respectable air.

"Daddy's so long," she said to herself, as she smoothed and patted, "and I'm afraid he doesn't sleep very quietly." Once or twice lately she had waked to hear her father going upstairs at what seemed to her a very late hour, and she fancied he often looked tired in the morning, and was sometimes not so cheerful as usual.

"Poor Daddy! It's not so easy to be the chauffeur of the family six when everything costs so much," she was thinking as she finished the room and went over to shut the window.

The sight of a woman passing made her step back hastily. It was Mrs. Parkes on her morning trip

to the market, and Anne knew she would look at the house all the way by, and would call to her if she were in sight. She had a sort of helpless feeling that some day would see her walking off with this neighbor of hers, and that, in spite of herself, she would have to be taught how and when and where to buy the necessaries of life. She could fancy Mrs. Parkes saying, "Poor Mr. Sheldon, with those six children! If I had the training of that oldest daughter I'd soon teach her that clothes don't grow on bushes." That remark about clothes and bushes had rankled in Anne's mind for so long that by now she was sure Mrs. Parkes really meant it just as she had said it.

Her neighbor out of sight, Anne stood by the window a moment. It was a mild day, but cloudy, and so damp that it seemed likely to change into rain. "If it keeps as warm as this we shan't have snow for Christmas," she said to herself. Not that it mattered much to her, but the children would be disappointed; and, after all, snow and stars, holly red and green, and a fragrant, sparkling tree seemed, all together, to make Christmas.

She frowned a little over this last item. Ever since she could remember they had had a tree, but when she had spoken of it to father a night or two ago, he looked troubled, and suggested having just stockings—or a Christmas box.

"I s'pose Rose and Ellis won't mind, but it's the other three." The question bothered her as she went back into her own room. Three weeks ago, at her father's suggestion, she had moved into Aunt Lucia's room, and she loved being by herself, and having the use of the big old-fashioned desk which had belonged to her grandfather.

"It's up to me," she decided with a sigh, "it's up to me to make the kiddies believe there never was anything so nice in the world as a Christmas box—or—or whatever I can think up."

When troubles pressed too heavily, Anne's most effective remedy was to sit down and write them to Miss Graham. Often these letters were not sent, because, of course, you couldn't tell your family worries to anyone without feeling a little ashamed of it afterward. But they served the purpose of steadying Anne's thoughts, and sometimes the very act of trying to make her perplexities clear to another person brought a solution of them.

So this morning her pen ran on glibly for a whole page about Christmas-tree troubles before it occurred to her that, in her endeavor to explain, she was confiding her father's anxieties, or what she imagined them to be, even more than her own, to someone who was almost a stranger.

Slowly she tore the page into tiny pieces and dropped them into the scrap-basket. "It will

never do to send that," she said to herself, and in the next few moments wrote impulsively:

"This year will be the first time I've ever planned a Christmas for the family, and I'm bound it shall be a good one, though I don't know yet just how I'm going to manage it. It makes me blush with shame to think that I never did anything to help Aunt Lucia with all the good times she gave us. So far as I can remember Christmas meant getting my own presents—of course I did give some to the others—and then hiding away with one of the new books I was sure to have. Now I can see how positively piggy that was."

Later in the letter her pen raced on with a description of the stormy afternoon when their opposite neighbor had so unexpectedly come to make their acquaintance.

"That was four days ago, but she has been ill ever since, and we haven't seen her. I remembered that it was part of my 'game' to get better acquainted with people and try to like them, so I've made myself go twice to inquire for her, and I shall go again soon, perhaps to-day. I haven't yet been able to persuade Rose to go. She declares that she doesn't want to get intimate with a girl who has so much money. That doesn't trouble me at all, and I have a fellow-feeling for her if she's lonesome.

"Dear Fairy Godmother, please forgive this chatterbox of a letter. It is only my pen that chatters, and, if you were here, probably I shouldn't

be able to say a sentence of any length. And please, please, come to Melford again soon. Sometimes I'm afraid I've only dreamed you. Not that I *could* dream anything so wonderful as your letters, and the photograph, which I love. Only I want the real you, and I long to have my father and the others know you, too. I keep your picture in a little frame on my desk, and you've no idea how often I gaze at it. Father took it over to the window the other day and looked at it for several minutes, and when he brought it back, he said, 'Anne, your friend has delightful eyes. They talk and smile even in a picture.' Of course I knew that before, but I loved having him say it.

"Well, I must end this and go out and mail it. The doctor says I must take a walk every pleasant morning and afternoon, so I think up errands and go the longest way to do them. I went to see the doctor again this week and he looked pleased and said I was a good girl, and that soon he should be able to give me a little more reading-time, which, of course, made me blissful.

"I shall hope for one of your dear notes soon. You don't know how much they mean to me.

"Yours faithfully,

"ANNE SHELDON."

The letter sealed and stamped, Anne went once more to the window, and this time had no chance to jump out of sight before Mrs. Parkes, passing on her homeward way, saw her and vigorously motioned to her to open the window.

"I want to tell you that you'd better order your Christmas tree right away," she said in her usual emphatic manner. "You're going to have one, of course."

Anne hesitated, and Mrs. Parkes went on speaking. "If you're bothered about getting it ready, I'll come over and help you—or do it all if you'll let me. There's nothing I like better than trimming Christmas trees for children."

There was something soft, almost wistful, in the way Mrs. Parkes said that, and Anne was glad that she had a real excuse for not accepting the offer.

"It's ever so good of you to want to do it"—somehow the very saying of the grateful words made her feel less repellent than she usually did when this neighbor offered advice or help—"but father and I decided that we'd try having just stockings and a Christmas box this year."

"My goodness! That's no kind of a Christmas for kiddies. They won't think they've had anything." Mrs. Parkes' voice had the usual sharp ring, and she was obviously disappointed. "I should think you—but there—Mr. Parkes says I must stop trying to manage other people. Goodness, child, it's reckless of you to stand at that open window so long. Come over, and ask me anything you want—any time."

Anne closed the window promptly. "She might have remembered that she asked me to open it," she said to herself impatiently, but the next minute she laughed. "That *was* funny, and somehow she doesn't make me bristle quite so much as I used to. Perhaps that three pounds I've gained is making me fat and good-natured." With which cheering thought she departed to put on hat and coat and take her morning walk.

As she closed the door behind her she decided that she would go first and inquire for Roberta, and she went across the street, and up the steps of the big house with no thought but that the next moment would see her coming down again. Instead, to her surprise, the maid asked her to come in, adding that Miss Roberta had been hoping she would come this morning.

The next instant, Roberta's voice hailed her joyously from the hall above. "Come up, Anne; come up," she called. "I'm wild to see you, and where's your pretty sister? Oh, of course, she's in school." She was standing at the head of the stairs, and she seized Anne by both arms when she reached the top. "Oo-ooh! but I'm glad to see you!" she exclaimed, leading the way along the hall. "Come into my sitting-room. I'm going to have you all to myself this morning, for mother and my governess have gone shopping."

"I mustn't stay long," Anne protested. "I have to go for a walk every morning, and I'm late in starting."

"Fiddle! Let it go for this morning. Are you one of those awful creatures who has to do everything by rule? Don't tell me that you are." Roberta looked so aggrieved that Anne laughed.

"Well, you see, the reason I'm out of school is because I'm not very strong," she said half-apologetically. To herself she seemed a veritable giant of health beside this delicate girl whose dark eyes looked bigger than ever in the small pale face. "And I'm what Daddy calls—coöperating with the doctor so that I can get well fast and go back to school."

"And I suppose the doctor says you must walk and walk and walk."

"Twice a day—and some housework in between." Anne settled back in a comfortable chair and stole a shy glance at the pretty room, which, being decorated in white and gold, had a sunshiny effect even on a dark day.

"How awful! If we're going to be friends you must promise not to tell me how far you walk and how much good it does you." At sight of her guest's astonished gaze Roberta laughed a little, but went on stubbornly. "My doctor says that I could be loads better if I would only exercise, and

that, probably, I should hardly be lame at all; but I'm no such good child as you are."

"Why don't you try? If you lived with my sister Rose, you would. There doesn't seem to be any room in her world for people who can't play tennis and ——" Anne stopped, suddenly conscious that she was saying the wrong thing.

"Don't mind. I know you were thinking about yourself and not me," said Roberta. "I wish I had a sister to squabble with. But not even one like Rose could make me exercise. It's too much trouble. How do you like my little sitting-room?"

Anne, grateful for the change of subject, was enthusiastic. "It's a darling room. I love that window-seat. You can see our house from it when the trees are bare, can't you? And how lovely to have a piano all to yourself. Won't you—do you feel well enough to play for me?"

"Do you play, and are you fond of music?" Roberta asked the question without moving from her chair, and Anne was impressed with the idea that something depended on her answer.

"Not a note, but I love it," she said earnestly.

"All right, then. I hate to play for persons who really don't care and who ask just to be polite."

Seated at the piano, Roberta looked as if she were in the place where she belonged. Her expres-

THE PIANO BEGAN TO TALK TO HER

sion grew soft and serious, and her hands, small, yet strong and flexible, touched the keys in a way that thrilled the heart of her listener. To Anne's fancy the piano began to talk to her. She listened with closed eyes, and her seeing mind pictured breezy heights, green and fragrant, with a blue sky bending over; and her ear caught a lilting tune as of someone piping for others to dance. Almost as clear as the sound were the color, light and fragrance.

"What is it?" she cried when it ended. "It's lovely, and it made pictures for me. It was like all out-of-doors — beautiful — and I heard — now I know what it was—a shepherd's pipe."

"Well, you're certainly the finest audience I ever had." A red spot burned in Roberta's cheek, and she looked queerly excited. "I call it 'The Shepherd of the Hills.' It's something I composed," she ended with an attempt at indifference.

"You really composed it yourself?" Anne gasped.

"Oh, yes. I've played things of my own ever since I can remember." Roberta spoke as carelessly as if she had asserted she could—string beads.

"But—but ——" began Anne, and then forgot what she was going to say, for a singing melody, set to a delicate swaying accompaniment, filled her consciousness. It was a slumberous, soothing air,

which stirred Anne's imagination and sang itself to a drowsy end long before she was ready.

"That's lovely," she said with a little sigh of satisfaction. "It put real words into my head. Why—why, Roberta, you're wonderful. You'll be a great composer some day, won't you?"

"Not the least chance of it. I can play things and I can write them out after a fashion, but it's too much work to learn how to do it properly. Then, unless I could be as great as Wagner or—or Beethoven, I shouldn't care about it."

"Well, how do you know you can't till you try?" Anne demanded bluntly. "Oh, are you getting up—aren't you going to play to me again?"

"Next time I will. I shall probably inflict on you everything I compose, because you're so—so understanding. But to-day I don't feel quite up to playing much." Roberta cuddled herself into a big chair and put her head against the back. "I believe we're going to be friends. That is if you'll promise not to nag me about taking exercise."

"Well, will *you* promise not to nag *me* about taking exercise?" Anne answered unexpectedly. "Because I'm bound to do it—it's part of my plan for the winter."

"A girl with an imagination like yours shouldn't have hard and fast plans," objected Roberta, but

she was smiling at the neat way in which Anne had come back at her.

"Oh, my imagination knows its place and doesn't interfere with plans," Anne answered lightly. "Besides, this is my winter for being practical—I'm just getting my eyes open. If I could only persuade Effie to teach me I'd try cooking."

"Oh, mercy! I'm afraid we shan't be chums after all." Roberta's dismay was genuine. "Does Rose feel the way you do about—about everything?"

"Not so that you'd notice it." Anne's eyes were twinkling.

The other girl sighed with relief. "I shall have to make Rose like me, then. I just love you already, but I know I should disappoint you terribly if you saw me often. I wish you'd call me Bobby, though, or Berta, or something different from plain, strung-out Ro-ber-ta."

"All right, Miss Bobby; I think that is a cute name, and I've been calling you that in my mind ever since I heard the chauffeur say it. And now I must go. Please come and see us soon."

"Indeed I shall. I expect to be out in a day or two, and I shan't try any more excursions on my own feet—when it rains. I believe I can walk across to your house when the ground is dry."

"Of course you can. Do try it."

"I wish you wouldn't go so soon; I hate that horrid old walk you're going to take." Miss Bobby said this so wistfully that Anne, putting on her coat, almost took it off again. "Please ask Rose to come over, and the other sister—the one with the velvet fingers."

"I shall, and Connie will come, I'm sure. She loves to call on the neighbors. And now good-by. I'm so glad you're better, and I'll come again soon. It makes me feel selfish to be going now, but—well, you understand."

"Oh, yes, I understand." Roberta was looking at her with mocking eyes. "We can't have our precious plans disarranged for anyone, can we? O-oh!" she added in swift repentance, her eyes growing softer, "that was Roberta who said that. Horrid thing! Miss Bobby is much nicer, and she thinks you were sweet to come. Good-by."

Anne, half-sorry to go, wondering whether she should have stayed, stepped out on the porch to find that the enveloping mist had changed to a penetrating rain. For an instant she questioned whether she might go back; then she decided to use this unexpected time in hunting for a box which would hold their Christmas gifts.

The attic proved a treasure-house, for there Anne found a long deep box of heavy pasteboard, and covered it with a soft draping of red cheesecloth

which came to light from one of the trunks. She remembered that the cheesecloth had been dyed and used for tableaux years ago, and it gave her a sense of being quite grown-up to handle the crimson folds, faintly musty from having been shut away so long.

"There! That isn't so bad," she said to herself as she fastened the last end of red in place. It was cold in the attic, and even though she had on a sweater and a woolen tam she was chilly enough to be glad that she had finished her work for this morning. "Now when I go for a walk I'll get some evergreen and pin it on the cheesecloth."

She got up stiffly, because she had been sitting on one foot, and gathered into her arms to take downstairs another box found this morning. She had stifled a sigh as she looked in it, for here were all the Christmas-tree ornaments which Aunt Lucia had put away so carefully. She would take them down into her room, and hang them somewhere.

"I don't care how nice a box may be, I know I'm going to miss the tree," she said to herself, and then with her first step in the direction of the stairs, "Ouch! My foot's asleep."

She stamped the offending foot, and then, putting down the box of ornaments, she began almost unconsciously to take dancing steps, marking the rhythm with the prickly foot which was gradually

coming awake. Presently she found herself humming a tune softly, and going about the attic in a dance wholly of her own invention, which seemed to require certain rhythmic motions of the arms to complete it.

When she stopped, breathless from being her own orchestra, she was standing directly in front of an old mirror which seemed to be lying in wait for her, and was offering a picture that at first glance she scarcely recognized. Real color in the cheeks, eyes bright and clear, shining strands of hair from under the soft white cap; Anne could not help smiling frankly at her own reflection.

"What a glorious place for exercise," she said out loud, and at the words, by some trick of her imagination, a small, pale, wistful face, framed in dark hair, looked out of the mirror beside her own, and then vanished.

"You wouldn't want me even to tell you, little Miss Bobby, that doing this has made me feel warm and alive all over—why, it makes me feel that I could almost fly," her thoughts ran on. Why not come up here often and dance around and swing her arms if it made her look like this? It would do for rainy days, and be fun for a little while, anyway. She could make up dances the way the girls did at school; she could be Atalanta running a race, and turned from her course by the golden apples; or a

forest-nymph, or a girl chasing butterflies, or —— Anne's eager imagination flew wildly for an instant, and then with a swift, appraising glance over the floor-space of the big attic, she settled with conviction on one practical thing which she might try.

She picked up the box of ornaments and left it in her closet on her hasty way down to the kitchen where Effie was ironing.

"Is there anything I ought to do just now to help?" she asked eagerly, "because if there isn't, and you hear a rattling and bumping up in the attic you'll know I'm trying Rose's roller skates."

"Better take Connie's. Your foot's small."

"And, Effie, please don't mention that I'm trying to learn. I want to surprise them."

"No." Effie shut her lips in a tight line, as though even a word of one syllable were a strain on her capacity. Ten minutes later, not hearing any sound, she went to the foot of the stairs. "If you bump too hard, call me," she said in a loud and somewhat anxious voice.

"All right—thanks—I've just this minute got 'em on," Anne called back, with a curious sense of being grateful even for Effie's interest in her proceedings.

During the next half hour she learned many of the cruel things roller skates can do when one least expects it, but she also established a certain mastery

over them, and finally succeeded in going once around the attic without falling.

"There!" she said aloud when that was accomplished, dropping down on the nearest seat. "'I've did it once,' as Susan says, and I won't try again this morning. My, but it's warm in this attic!"

As she took off the skates she was wondering whether she should ever be brave enough to try ice-skates. Rose would laugh at her for thinking it took courage to do a thing like that; Rose always plunged into any game or exercise with a zest and persistence that made her a conqueror. With a flash of thought back through the years of her life, Anne realized that she had always been standing by herself watching other children play; living in a world of her own, as it were, and admitting chiefly the friends of her imagination.

"I s'pose it isn't too late to change when you're sixteen," she said to herself in wistful challenge. Something in her spirit leaped to a response, and she walked over to the mirror again and faced a new Anne Sheldon, who looked out at her flushed and disheveled, but with the light of purpose in her clear gaze.

"You've got to crawl out of your shell and learn to do what other folks do," she said sternly, nodding her head in emphasis, and the girl in the mirror

looked back at her, fiercely determined, and nodded her head as if she entirely agreed with this noble command.

Down in the kitchen a few minutes later she told Effie that she meant to try this every unpleasant day. "I could open some of the windows, and that will make it seem a little like out-of-doors."

"It will." Effie shut the oven door with a fairy-like touch that seemed scarcely to belong to her energetic temperament.

"The exercise makes me warm—makes me feel that I—oh, that I want to do—to do a lot of things," Anne said with a certain indefiniteness, yearning for conversation, but hesitating to put her inmost thoughts before so unresponsive a person.

Effie stooped to the oven again and took out a cake which had needed just that last moment to perfect its delicate brown. Then she turned to Anne with the admiring gaze which nowadays she frequently bestowed upon her, and which, in its eloquence, expressed far more than her lips could ever say.

"Go to it," she murmured, and, as Anne went out of the room, she felt that both her looks and her purposes had been approved.

CHAPTER IX

SNOW-DRIFTS

ANNE's efforts to make the idea of a Christmas box seem attractive succeeded beyond her hopes. Rose and Ellis were too busy with other plans to care how the gift-giving was managed, and Connie, after the first surprise, rallied immediately, and became a staunch supporter of the idea. In her helpful way she at once substituted a box for a tree in the long-drawn-out bedtime story she was telling Susan and Jim, and declared that Gladys, her heroine, thought a Christmas box much more "mysterious."

Three days before Christmas snow came, hiding the bleak landscape under a cloak of lovely whiteness and continuing until even the most grasping child was ready to cry enough. A persistent wind piled it into drifts, and made progress so difficult that the schools closed early in the afternoon.

The telephone bell rang just as Rose walked into the house and she sprang at once to answer.

"It's probably for me," she said, and sent a clear,

genial " hello " over the wire. Anne, sitting in the next room, heard one side of the conversation that followed and at first wondered who could be talking.

" No, I don't know who it is.

" I can't guess.

" You'd better tell me, or I shall ring off. I've just come into the house and ——

" How do you know? " There was a hint of irritation in Rose's voice.

" Watching me? What do you mean by that? Where are you? Oh, is it ——" Anne noticed that the irritation changed to an ominous coolness— " Oh, hello, Roberta.

" Well, that's your name, isn't it?

" I can't possibly. I've got to change my dress and get busy on a Christmas present I'm making.

" Oh, I couldn't take it over there. Too much bother. Besides, Daddy likes to have us at home when it storms like this.

" It wouldn't be polite for me to contradict. I'll come some other time. Good-by." Rose hung up the receiver with a jerk and walked into the room where Anne was sitting, passing Ellis in the hall.

" Well, you certainly turned her down good and plenty," remarked her brother. " That's the second or third time she's asked you, too."

" I know it. She said she guessed I didn't want

to, and I told her it wouldn't be polite to contradict."

"That was rather horrid," Rose went on in answer to Anne's unspoken protest. "But she hangs on so, and she wishes I wouldn't call her Roberta. And—and I *don't* want to go, anyway. I should have to hear what she's going to give everyone for Christmas, and what she expects, and I know I should see a hundred things over there that I'm wild to have."

"Gingeration! You're going to have a nice time growing up if that's the way you feel." Ellis was staring at her in open-eyed amazement. "You'd better get those bees out of your bonnet right away quick. No matter how much you may have there'll always be people who'll have more."

"I s'pose so, but I shan't have to know 'em if I don't want to," Rose answered decisively. "And I should once like to have enough money to buy Christmas presents for my family."

"Make it twice," Ellis advised. "That's a different matter, isn't it, Nan? Of course she ought to save all her money between Christmases so's to have enough for that."

"Don't try to be funny. You may all be sure you're not going to get much from me this year, though I've scrimped and saved—for weeks."

Rose poured the last words down from the hall above and departed into her own room.

Ellis went upstairs, too, and Anne was left with only her thoughts for company. She had kept still while Rose was talking because she did not know how to meet this particular problem. The idea poked itself unpleasantly into her mind that, after all, she was a very unsatisfactory steersman for the family, because she never knew what to say when anything came up outside the usual routine. Of course Rose could not be blamed for not liking Roberta, but it seemed absurd not to be willing to know her because her father was rich. Anne sighed over her own incapacity to meet the situation, and decided to talk it over with Daddy—perhaps this evening after the others had gone to bed.

But to-night Daddy was delayed by the storm, and came home so tired that even Susan, after her first demand for bright pennies, left him in peace. After dinner he went into the living-room and sat down before the fire with a book in his hand, but for awhile he scarcely turned a page, and Anne, watching him from time to time, decided that a discussion of family affairs must be kept for another evening.

Just before her bedtime, Connie put on rubber boots and sweater and woolen cap and went out on the porch to investigate weather conditions. The wind had gone down at sunset, and as she closed the

door behind her, Connie fancied that she was stepping into an enchanted world, still and white and beautiful. Since she had last looked out the snow had ceased to fall, and now stars were pricking through a sky of velvety darkness. As she gazed, Connie felt what she called joy-shivers. "They're not real shivers," she would explain when anyone laughed or questioned. "I feel 'em in summer just as much as I do in winter. I can't tell you what makes 'em, but I like the feeling, and I hope it'll never stop."

So now she looked at the snow which stretched in an unbroken billow from porch to sidewalk; not even father's footsteps were visible, though he had plunged through it only two hours before. And she gazed at the stars, and plowed her way to the end of the porch to find one or two of her favorites whose names father had told her. Then having joy-shivered sufficiently, she turned into her practical self again and went into the house.

"Daddy, dearest, it's stopped snowing, and stars are out, and do you want me to call up John Dookins and tell him to come early to shovel?" she asked all in one breath.

Father, who was really reading by this time, came out of his book with a jump. "What's that? What is it you're saying, Connie? John Dookins out there?"

"No, Daddy; I thought p'r'aps you'd like me to 'phone him. The snow's in big drifts on our side of the street, and on our front walk."

Her father gazed at her intently, even frowning a little, as if he were trying to bring his mind back from some distance and focus it on the immediate necessity.

"No; it isn't any use to telephone Dookins. He has to go first to the persons whose furnaces he takes care of. Besides, he's too expensive a workman for us. Perhaps we can get some boys to help. Or, if not, Ellis and I will have to manage."

"Oh, father, probably there's some man besides Dookins who will do the job for—for—well, for not so much." Ellis, torn from his book at the mention of his name, was in dismay. It would take his spare time for the next two days, if he and father tackled the whole job.

"There isn't half as much snow on the Brents' side, as nearly as I can tell by the 'lectric light," observed Connie.

"Wouldn't you know it would be that way?" demanded Rose, looking up from the necklace she was making for her chum. "Now they could afford to pay for all the snow shovellers they wanted. I don't think things are fair in this world."

"Well, anyway"—Connie's eyes were big and bright as if the idea behind them were a big one,

too—" anyway, I could go out and shovel snow and not hurt me a mite, but Roberta couldn't."

" Connie, you're just right." Father's voice was full of the boyish eagerness which to Anne was so appealing. " Thank goodness, we could all shovel if it were necessary. I'm sure even Nan could do her bit if she has to—she looks so much better. Now I think of it, I believe I'll go out and start the shovelling."

" Aw, father—not to-night. If you do, I shall have to go, too, and I'm tired as anything." A moment before Ellis had been envying the hero of the story he was reading, a boy about his own age, who, after tracking them for miles, was now, single-handed, holding up a gang of burglars. " In the morning there'll be rafts of boys 'round just begging for the chance, and they need the money for Christmas."

" His unselfishness makes me weep," murmured Rose, pretending to wipe her eyes. " How 'bout needing money yourself at Christmas? Have you bought my present? "

" That's none of your affair—yet. And, anyway, Dad and Nan are always teasing me to read books, and now—now that I've got one I really like—I have to be stopped in the most exciting place." Ellis' voice was full of irritation.

Anne looked at him with some scorn. " I'm sure

you never caught me teasing you to read that ——" She stopped because she happened to meet her father's glance, and his eyes were telling her to leave this to him.

"When you finish let me take it, will you, Ellis?" he remarked casually. "If it's interesting it will be nice to have something to talk over mornings while we're dressing."

The expression on Ellis' face as he turned to look at his father was one of mingled surprise and doubt, but he met a gaze serious and friendly. "Aw' right," he said briefly, and fixed his eyes on the story again, though for the next moment he did not see a word. The book had been recommended by a boy whose opinion in other matters had no value for Ellis; he did not in the least believe his father would care for it, but it would be rather jolly to talk over what the hero had done. There was one thing he really should like to ask father about—and then a gripping sentence caught his eye and he was lost to the world.

Mr. Sheldon left his chair and wandered to the window, stopping on his way to pat Rose's golden head. Then he opened the front door, and, a moment later, Anne heard him stamping on his overshoes, and she hurried into the hall, with Connie at her heels, to protest.

"Perhaps if I work a little—not too much—it

will make me sleep better," he said in answer to Anne's objections.

"Daddy, I'm going, too." Connie was heading for the hall closet as she spoke. "I'm so wide awake I can't possibly sleep for hours unless I have some exercise. And it doesn't matter about bedtime, because we only have a half-day to-morrow, and I've done my homework. Besides, I can't remember the name of one of the stars you showed me."

"If Connie's going to help, I am," Anne said stoutly, but father shook his head.

"No, sir—madam. You're getting on too well to spoil it by using a big shovel—and a small one's not much good."

"But, Daddy, I'm so tired doing things alone—I want to work—or play—with someone," Anne said piteously.

Her father paused in the act of shrugging himself into an outworn coat to look at her thoughtfully. "That's different, isn't it, from what you said two or three months ago? Then, you seemed to think you liked better to 'flock all alone.'"

"Yes, sir." Anne was looking him straight in the eyes, but she spoke under her breath, because Connie, who had crawled out of sight in search of rubbers, was now emerging from the coat-closet. "I—I think I've changed about that."

"Good for you. Get an old broom, then, and you and Connie between you can clear the porch."

"Hurrah for the snow-shovellers—Daddy and Anne and I are going out to snovel show—I mean to shovel snow!" Connie walked into the living-room and spoke so suddenly that Rose jumped. "Anne's got a broom, so there's a shovel left," she ended with apparent innocence.

"Oh, Con, you've made me spill some of my beads!"

"I see 'em. I'll pick 'em up." Connie the obliging was down on her knees in a second. "I thought p'r'aps if you knew what we were going to do you'd like to come out, too. A great, strong thing like you could be a lot of help."

"I should say not. I'm not going to make my hands all calloused with a shovel. I've just got them looking nice for Edna's party."

"Last summer you were always showing off the calloused places your tennis racquet made." Connie turned back on her way to the door to fire this shot, and her indignant glance took in Ellis, who appeared to be utterly unmindful of everything going on about him.

In reality, though, his mind was running on like a talking-machine, and he was only half-seeing the page before his eyes. "Why do they shovel now? I want to get this chap out of the fix he's in—let

them do what they can to-night and I'll manage my share to-morrow." After this decision there was a moment's rest while he tried to fix his attention on the book and read one paragraph three times over without taking in what it said.

Then it began again. "Father's tired—the girls can't help much—Rose could do more than the two of them—crikey! I wish this fellow wouldn't keep getting into trouble every minute—if I finish this chapter he'll get into a new mess at the end of it—what was that last thing I read, anyway?" One more effort to read while he listened intently for the sound of his father's shovel. "Golly! Not a scrape yet—it must be awful deep—what was that Connie said about another shovel?" He put the book on the table, and reluctantly dragged himself from the chair. "Guess I'll take a look out," he drawled, as though he felt the need of excusing himself. Exactly four minutes later, with a trench cap pulled over his ears and a discarded reefer buttoned tightly around him, he was attacking the biggest drift he could find.

Rose, left alone now in a very still room, went on stringing beads. Five minutes before, she had been telling herself that if Ellis went she supposed she must, but that was when she felt quite sure that nothing would persuade him to go.

"Ellis ought to go," she said to herself stub-

bornly. "He's the oldest, and he's a big, strong boy. Of course, I could help as much as Anne or Connie—'Anne *and* Connie,'" corrected an inner voice—"but they're just playing 'round because they want to. No one really expects the girls of the family to go out and shovel."

This was really quite a satisfactory view of the situation, and Rose hummed a little, and listened in spite of herself to the voices outside, and went on fashioning the necklace with considerable contentment. At least it would have been contentment if that wretched inner something that seemed to be so well acquainted with her hadn't asserted all of a sudden that perfectly good muscles like hers ought to be able to use a shovel and a broom as readily as a hockey-stick or a tennis-racquet.

"Fiddlesticks! What if they could? That doesn't prove that I ought to go out there to-night when there are four people shovelling," she said with some irritation, and quite as if she were answering another person. Then she fairly frowned in her effort to put her mind on the necklace, and went on stringing beads.

Fifteen minutes later she heard her father tell Ellis not to try to widen the path, but to stop when he reached the boundary fence.

"Fudge! They'll be coming in now, and I really meant to help after all," she said crossly, putting

down her work, and getting up with the idea of going out anyway. The next instant Connie called out a gleeful "done," and she could hear Anne's broom being knocked against the porch rail. "Too late," she murmured, and then a sudden thought sent her flying to the kitchen. To her joy she found hot water in the kettle—just to set it over the coals would make it boil. She hunted in the closet for malted milk or beef-extract and found them both, and also a package of the biscuits father liked. Salt, pepper, celery salt and onion salt she set on the kitchen table—she was bound her banquet should be lavish as to condiments, at least—and after that she got a cup and spoon for each one. Finding that there was still time she seized a piece of brown wrapping-paper and a soft pencil and printed in striking letters:

CANTEEN FOR WORKERS
At the Sign of the Singing Kettle
Turn to the left.

"If I had time I'd make that more ship-shape," she said, looking at it with her head on one side. Then she pinned it under the light in the front hall, and as she scurried back to the kitchen she could hear the others brushing off the snow and stamping their feet in preparation for coming in.

"Why, Rose, this is the nicest thing possible,"

said father, walking into the kitchen the first one, and in spite of the hard work looking happier and more rested than he had earlier in the evening. "So this was why you stayed in—to give us a surprise, eh?"

He was so sure of it and so pleased with her that Rose could not resist letting him think so, but she was glad that the others came just at that moment and saved her from answering.

"Malted or—or Extracted?" she asked, waving both jars before her father, and then mixing a cupful with greatest care when he chose the latter. "Now a little celery salt, and a tiny bit of onion salt, and a nice, fresh biscuit—and there you are."

"Better wave a bay leaf over it," suggested Anne, who had spells of reading chafing-dish recipes and wondering if she could ever dare to try them. "I'm as hungry as a bear. That air was wonderful, wasn't it—I felt as if I could eat it."

"I'd advise you to try this brew instead," said her father. "And be sure, Rose, mix Ellis an especially tasty cupful, for he worked like a trooper."

"I had to. I was only out there about half as long," grunted Ellis, and gave Rose a glance that made her think he knew just how much this last minute activity of hers amounted to.

"Connie, you'll put your spoon in your eye instead of in your mouth if you're not careful," Anne

said a few moments later. "I should almost think you were sleepy."

"Oh, I'm not sleepy." Connie's dark eyes opened to a startling size. "I just shut my eyes to—to think a little—about what a nice party we're having."

"Curious, isn't it, how much easier it is to think that way?" her father remarked with perfect seriousness. "This *has* been a nice party—all of it—outdoors and in—it has made me feel better than I have for some time. And I'm gloriously sleepy. You young folks scamper off to bed, and I'll fix the furnace and turn in, too."

"I'll go down the cellar with you," Ellis offered unexpectedly.

"Someone ought to clear away here. It would break Effie's heart to find her kitchen looking like this in the morning." Anne began to pick up the cups, and yawned as she did so.

"Drop that cup," said Rose sharply, "and you and Connie clear out of the kitchen. This is my job."

"All right," Anne agreed with sleepy promptness, and the next minute Rose was alone.

The furnace must have required a little extra attention to-night, for by the time father and Ellis came upstairs, Rose had washed the cups and saucers, put everything in place with unusual care,

wiped Effie's cherished table, and was down on her knees taking up a few crumbs.

As she was partially hidden by the table her father failed to see her and walked straight through into the dining-room, but Ellis, putting up his hand to turn off the light, paused in amazement as his sister stood up flushed with her exertions.

"Well, of all things! Are you sweeping?" he demanded, as if the evidence of his eyes were not enough.

"No. I'm—I'm blacking my boots," Rose retorted sharply, as she went to the coal-hod to empty the dustpan.

"Ha-ha! Cute kid! Say, Rosy, what's struck you to-night to make you so helpful?"

"What made you go out and shovel?"

"I don't know." Ellis hesitated and then went on with perfect honesty. "I s'pose because I was so plaguey uncomfortable knowing father and—and Anne were doing it."

"Same here. It's all Anne's fault." There was a twinkle in Rose's eyes. "She needn't think she's the only one who can do anything for Daddy. Let's blame it on Anne."

"Just as you say. Old Anne's to blame then for our—our virtue." Ellis chuckled over his own conclusion. "Scoot, kid. I'm going to turn out this light."

CHAPTER X

ROBERTA SCORES

"Now, Susan, you'll do just what Connie says, won't you?" Anne admonished, as she stood on the porch to watch Connie and Susan and Jim start off with their sleds. The sky was a dazzling blue; the snow, banked high along the edge of the sidewalk, was turned into silver and diamonds by the sunshine; sleigh-bells jingled, giving one the feeling that Santa Claus was just around the corner.

"Uh-huh—I s'pose so—it's Cwismus to-morrow, isn't it?" Susan was industriously kicking a lump of snow into fragments, and her answer came in jerks.

"Yes." Anne smiled at Connie over the small sister's head.

"But there isn't going to be any twee. All the little girls I know is going to have a twee." In the last day or two Susan had talked about trees with mournful persistency, and no glowing descriptions of anything else could satisfy her.

This time Jimsey took a hand. "Aw, come off,

Susan, you've said that fifty times. You'll get just as many presents. 'Sides, if Daddy wants a box we'd oughter all want one." Jim could be trusted to think as his father did on most questions.

"Aw' right." Susan threw herself flat on her sled, and went down the little slope to the sidewalk and straight into a snowbank. Emerging, powdered with snow, "Aw' right," she repeated, "I'd like a box, then. C'mon." She waved an imperious hand and started in the direction of the coasting-place.

Anne, going into the house, was half sympathizing with Susan. The Christmas box, skilfully concealed from prying eyes, was waiting up in the attic, but, though she had tried to make it as pretty as possible, it would not be gay and glittering and spicy like a tree. "Anyway, we won't let Daddy know we don't like it so well," she resolved loyally, "and it just must be a pleasant Christmas, because it's the first one I've tried to manage."

After all, perhaps the last two months had proved that she could steer the family car a little bit, she told herself with satisfaction, as she went slowly upstairs. To be sure, no one except father, and possibly Effie, had seemed to realize that she was doing any more than she ever had done. Though now she stopped to think about it, she fancied that Rose looked at her occasionally in a puzzled way,

as if there were something she couldn't understand. It was part of the fun of the game to surprise Rose by doing the unexpected. "Some day, she may think I really amount to something," Anne said to herself with a queer little smile, as she turned her mattress and shook up pillows with a vigor that she had never felt until recently.

Half an hour later an imperative call sent her hurrying across the hall where Rose sat with flushed cheeks and a distressful frown.

"I'm in an awful pickle with this cape, and I can't make the hood look right, either," she said crossly as her sister entered the room. She and Ellis were to sing with a group of carolers to-night and then go to Edna's for supper. "Why, oh why, did I promise to make this? Look at me!"

Anne gazed at the offending cape, which bunched on one shoulder and drooped limply from the other, and then turned her eyes to the hood, which, to her imaginative mind, looked as if it knew itself to be sadly wrong and was sorry for it.

"They don't seem just right," she admitted helplessly. "But it won't show, will it? It will be dark when you're singing."

"Yes, but aren't we going to Edna's right afterward?" snapped Rose. "And we have to meet at half-past five, and there'll be oceans of time for everyone to see how ghastly this is. G-r-r-r! I'd

like to tear it limb from limb and then say I couldn't go." As she ended she grasped the red garment so suggestively that Anne gave a little cry.

"Oh, don't, please don't. Perhaps we can think up some way to fix it. I wish I weren't a stupid about such things."

"Well, you are, and you can't help it, I s'pose." In her family Rose never minced matters for the sake of politeness. "If Aunt Lucia was here she'd know how to fix it in a second. I don't see why father waits so long to get a housekeeper. I'm sure we need one enough."

For a moment Anne felt as though someone had struck her a blow and left her flat and gasping. It wouldn't have been so hard, she thought piteously, if she hadn't just been feeling a little happy over what she fancied she had accomplished. It didn't occur to her to question Rose's opinion. She might have known that this was the way it would seem to them all. Probably they missed Aunt Lucia every minute, and she had been mistaken in thinking that she was learning how to take her place in any degree.

It would spoil the whole day for her, she said to herself, and right on the end of that discouraging statement, felt a sudden spark of courage. This was where the game had pushed her into a corner, and it was her business to get out. After all, she

wasn't trying to take Aunt Lucia's place, nor even that of a housekeeper; she was making her own place, and she *would not give up.* The words said themselves in her mind with such emphasis that it almost seemed Rose must hear them.

"Let me try it," she urged, putting out her hand for the cape. "I can't hurt it and, perhaps, I can make it better."

"Not if I know it. There's no sense in having two of us boggle it. Probably you'd get eye-ache and headache over it, and you're just beginning to look half-way decent, and as if you had some go in you. No, sir! Nothing doing! Ugh! Hateful thing!"

Rose was holding the cape out at arm's length, and gazing at it with such a funny expression that Anne laughed in spite of herself. Then an idea, which she knew to be a good one, flashed into her mind.

"You might—you might ask Mrs. Parkes," she faltered, hating to suggest it, but unable to think of any other way.

"Nancy, that's one brilliant thought." Rose was her energetic self again as she tossed the cape in a bunch on the bed and went over to the mirror. "'Auntie Barkes' is just the one. She's made two or three costumes already, and she's always crazy to help us about something, only you never will let

her. I don't see what makes you act like such an icicle when she's 'round."

"Do I?" Anne said listlessly.

"*Do* I?" mimicked Rose. "I should say you did. You have a sort of touch-me-not, get-off-the-earth air that would discourage anyone. Now I really like her, and to prove that I do I'm going to ask her to do me a favor."

She pulled her front hair into a more becoming frame for her face, flicked a black speck from the tip of her nose and smiled at herself contentedly. Then gathering the red cape into her arms she started for the door.

"Sh!" she said, stopping short—"there's someone coming up on the porch—p'r'aps it's a package—I'll answer the bell."

By the time her tempestuous flight had swept her to the foot of the stairs she was sorry that she had not let Anne go, for she could see quite plainly that the Brent chauffeur was retreating down the walk, and that Roberta stood at the door holding several parcels.

As Rose pulled open the door she was thinking, "My goodness! She's brought us presents. Why should she? We haven't a thing to give her." And then she called, "Anne! Oh, Anne, here's Roberta," and smiled with relief because Anne was close behind her.

Miss Bobby, stepping in, took the smile to herself and responded immediately. "That's the first time you've looked glad to see me, you magazine-cover girl. Doesn't she look like one this morning, Anne?"

"Well, if I'm not better-looking than most of those silly creatures I'll give up!" Rose exclaimed with a heartfelt disgust that made the other girls laugh.

"I mean the ones we all like," Roberta answered promptly, and then, almost as if she had been able to read the thoughts that filled Rose's mind, she went on hurriedly, "I'm afraid you'll think it's dreadfully—dreadfully pushing for me to be bringing some little presents for you when I hardly know you, but, you see, you're the very first girls I've spoken to here, and I just had to celebrate that. And then I wanted to because I—I like you."

There was such an appealing air about her as she said the last words that undemonstrative Anne put her arm about the little unsteady figure, and even Rose felt a gleam of friendliness.

"It's sweet of you to want to give us presents," Anne said warmly, leading the way into the living-room, and pushing a chair before the fire for Roberta.

"You don't think it's sweet of me, do you?"

Miss Bobby demanded, turning a sudden penetrating glance on Rose, much to that young person's embarrassment. It was all very easy to be outspoken with one's family, but now—Rose wished fervently that she were on her way to Mrs. Parkes' house.

"I can't see why you don't like me," Roberta persisted, "nor why you won't come near me when I'm just starved for girls. You haven't had a chance yet to find out whether I'm horrid or not; and I'm half-way between you and Anne in age, so that can't be it." With her eyes fixed on Rose's face she was chattering on as if, by bringing all possible reasons into the light, she were hoping to find the real one. Suddenly her sensitive face clouded. "Is it—is it because I'm lame?" she demanded, her gay voice dulled a little.

"No! A hundred times, no!" Rose spoke loud in her distress, and a warm color flew even to the waves of hair on her forehead. "How can you think anything like that of me? I never dreamed you were lame until you told us, and I'd seen you a dozen times before. I—I ——" Rose began to stammer, but she went on, "I thought because your father's rich and—and you could have everything, that probably you were just putting on airs when you walked that way, and that most likely you were a snob." It was out now, and Rose looked defiantly

at Miss Bobby, who was still gazing speculatively at her.

"You didn't know I was lame even though you had seen me a dozen times before?" she repeated incredulously, "and you thought I was putting on airs when I walked like that? How could you believe any girl would be so silly?" In spite of her serious manner her eyes were crinkling joyously, and she could not help looking pleased. "I'm going to forgive you, though, because it is a comfort to know you didn't realize I walked that way because I have to."

Anne spoke quickly. "Perhaps you wouldn't have to if you'd mind your doctor."

"Now, Anne," Miss Bobby shook an impatient finger at her. "It's taking a mean advantage to bring up what I told you when I felt good, and—and confidential. Besides, I haven't finished with Rose.

"So you thought I was a snob, did you?" she went on slowly. "Well, to tell the truth, that's just what I was beginning to think about you. Not Anne"—she put out a possessive hand and touched Anne's arm—"but you."

"About me!" Rose stared at her in bewilderment. "Why, the very first time you came here you must have guessed that we were having a jubilation over—over second-hand clothes, and you

can't help knowing that we're not rich—that we haven't any automobile ——"

"Fiddlesticks!" interrupted Roberta Brent. "Those are things you buy with money, and there isn't enough of it in the world to pay for what you have." She was looking thoughtfully at Rose and talking just to her. "I know that if I were big and strong and—and pretty, and if I owned sisters and brothers, and a father who ever had time to stay at home—yours looks such a dear when you run out to meet him ——"

"He is." Anne and Rose spoke at the same instant.

"So's mine," Roberta asserted loyally. "But everyone in the country seems to need his advice about something. And mother's busy, too." She was silent for an instant, but before anyone else could speak she turned to Rose again with mischief in her gaze. "How could I tell but that you might feel high and mighty because you know all about dozens of your great-great-grandfathers?" she demanded. "And I couldn't scare up even a great-grandfather on Daddy's side. Anyway, if I had all the advantages you have, I suppose I should think I had a right to be haughty, and—and stand-offish. So I forgive you for being a snob, but I wish you'd have a—a change of heart."

It was such an absurd turning of the tables that

Rose laughed in spite of herself. "It wouldn't do for anyone to call me a snob in earnest," she said good-naturedly, "and I don't believe you're one either."

Roberta held out her hand impulsively. "Let's shake on it and start fair from to-day. And please try to like me a little, because I'm most awfully lonesome. There's Ben honking for me, and I mustn't keep mother waiting. We're off for the holidays, but after I get back you'll both come over, won't you?"

Almost before they could promise, she had gone, and neither of them could say afterward whether she had walked, or floated, or swung herself along in a strangely graceful way, across the room and into the hall. Anne, having to hasten her steps to keep up, opened the door for Ben, who was waiting to carry Miss Bobby to the automobile, and then stepped out on the porch to call a "Merry Christmas" to Mrs. Brent, who was waving to them.

Ellis, coming downstairs just as the machine moved away, poked his head out of the door to look, too. "My word, Anne! You're quite intimate with our rich neighbors, aren't you?" he said in pretended awe.

"I don't see anything very intimate about wishing them a 'Merry Christmas,'" Anne retorted

with some irritation. Now that Roberta had gone, the memory of what Rose had said about a housekeeper was filling her mind, and she felt hurt and discouraged and altogether uncomfortable.

"Roberta is all right," Rose said rather patronizingly. "I like people who hit right out from the shoulder the way she does, and I think I shall have her for a 'nintimate friend,' as Susan says."

"I s'pose your consent is all that's necessary," Ellis drawled, looking a little bewildered at this sudden change of attitude. "I couldn't see why you didn't fall on her neck from the first. She seems a nice-enough little thing. Oh, Anne, wait a minute."

Anne, who was going into the dining-room, stopped and turned toward him.

"Say, I can't find a decent-looking tie in my drawer. Do you suppose that young fiend of a Susan has been using 'em for doll-clothes?"

Anne looked perplexed. "Why, I thought there were a lot of ties the last time I opened your drawer."

"Well, there are," Ellis admitted grudgingly. "But not any of 'em clean enough to wear tonight."

"It's your own fault," Rose called from the stairs. "Effie told you that if you would give them to her she'd clean them for you."

"Don't I know that? I forgot. Anyway, Aunt Lucia used to look things over for me and keep 'em in order, and I haven't got used to the new ways yet."

"Boys ought to be expected to take care of their belongings just as much as girls." Rose, still lingering, was manifestly enjoying this little argument with her brother. "You can't expect Anne to do everything Aunt Lucia did. They're new ways for her, too, and she isn't used to them yet. And Effie's too busy to clean the ties to-day."

"Oh, well, father'll let me take one of his for to-night," Ellis said easily, and was starting upstairs when Anne stopped him.

"Don't take father's. I bought you one for a Christmas present, and you can have it to-day. You won't mind if you don't get it to-morrow." Anne smiled, and said it all as naturally as if the reply had been in her mind since Ellis first mentioned ties; when, as a matter of fact, her thoughts had been in a tangle, and the old idea of keeping still until she could make the right move had been the only thing to straighten the knotted threads. "I—I'll look over your ties and clean them myself after Christmas if Effie doesn't have time," she added, hating the distasteful task, but not able to see how she could avoid it.

"You're a little brick, Anne," her brother said

with so much feeling in his voice that Rose, who for the last moment or two had been looking over the balusters, felt a sudden impulse to offer to help, but instantly thought better of it and went off into her own room.

"Of course I'd much rather have it now; and I'll do as much for you some day," Ellis went on, and then, lowering his voice, he added, "Say, Anne, what's the matter with father? He's been so glum these last two mornings while we were dressing that I could hardly get a word out of him."

"I don't know, I'm sure." Anne looked at him thoughtfully. "Unless, because it's Christmas, and he'd love to get us everything we want. And, of course, it must always make him think about mother—and—and miss her."

"Jingo! I s'pose that's it." Ellis was staring soberly out of the hall window. "Oh, I say, do you remember how she used to do up presents in all sorts of funny ways, and sometimes hide 'em and watch us hunt; and say 'cold' or 'hot,' or pretend to shiver? And then she'd laugh and get us all going just the way Connie does sometimes. Do you remember?"

"Do you suppose I could ever forget it?" Anne answered, but before the words were out of her mouth her brother was half-way upstairs.

"So long. I'll put some of those ties in your

room; and if you'll lay out the new one when you have time I'll be much obliged," he called back in his most growly voice, without turning around.

After that it was a day of curious ups and downs so far as Anne was concerned. Sometimes the thought of what Rose had said filled her mind to the exclusion of everything else. Then, as if that were not enough, memory would add to it the fact that Ellis was missing what Aunt Lucia used to do for him. When she got so far down in the doleful dumps that she thought nothing could bring her up again, that same capricious memory cheerfully repeated, "Anne, you're a little brick," and made it sound just as convincing as when Ellis said it. Over and over again she admitted that she must either confess herself a failure or—try harder, and throughout the long day she could never decide which would be her way out.

With all this going on in the bottom of her mind, she, nevertheless, managed to keep fairly cheerful, and she helped the younger children to do up their gifts quite as if it were the jolliest and most important thing in life. Which piece of self-control, if she had only known it, was a pretty good proof of how far she had progressed since that October day when she first got her eyes open.

After awhile five o'clock came, and Connie, who

was a grateful soul, would not let Anne help about giving the children their supper. "They've agreed to go to bed as soon as they finish," she said, "because I've promised that we three will look at our stockings, the minute we wake, even if it's black night. We've all coasted so hard, though, that I guess we shan't open our eyes too early."

Somewhat later Rose and Ellis went off in a great rush, and Connie departed upstairs with the two youngest. Anne, rather pale and tired, waited before the fire in the living-room for Connie to come down again, and for father, who was already a little late, to get home.

Suddenly Effie, with a funny smile hovering about her lips, appeared in the doorway. "Man to see you," she announced mysteriously. "At the back door."

CHAPTER XI

FLAXY DOES IT

'Anne went quickly and unsuspectingly and found—father. "Wh-what has happened?" she began, half-startled, but his first eager words reassured her.

"Nan, I stopped to buy a Christmas tree," he said almost in a whisper. "I got a boy to bring it along on his sled, and I've tucked it in the vegetable cellar. This evening you and I'll dress it. I just couldn't stand it without one—I couldn't stand it."

Anne laughed and all at once felt happier. Here was Daddy in his most lovable, boyish mood, and nothing else mattered—much.

"Shall I go around to the front door and pretend I'm just coming home?" father asked eagerly. "I was afraid to try that way first, for fear I could never get a minute alone with you if the children caught me."

"It's all right; you can come in any old way," 'Anne asserted with joy in her voice. "Connie's been a perfect darling all day and she got the chil-

dren off early. She'll love to help about the tree. And, oh, my poor Christmas box—all wasted."

"Not a bit. You had the fun of doing it. We'll use 'em both—box behind the tree with the presents in it—tree all lighted up—glittering—glorious—oh, by the way, have you any idea where the ornaments are?" Father stopped on his way through the dining-room and looked at Anne apprehensively.

"In my closet. I must have suspected you'd change your mind."

"And I know where I put the lighting apparatus, if someone hasn't moved it. Give me the little electric lantern and I'll run up into the attic before I wash my hands for supper."

But first Mr. Sheldon took packages out of his bulging pockets until there was a toppling heap in the hall-chair.

"There!" He slapped his sides as though some lurking parcel might have defied his search. "I believe that's all." He looked at Anne and smiled a little self-consciously under her surprised gaze. "Honest, Anne, I didn't mean to buy you all two presents apiece," he said boyishly, "but, to-day, Christmas has just got hold of me! I assure you I was perfectly helpless and not a bit responsible."

"Daddy, you're a naughty boy." Anne was handing him the electric lantern as she spoke.

"You'll have to go to the attic for punishment; and do be still, or the kiddies will hear you."

After he had gone up the first flight, Anne bethought herself of the Christmas box, and went up after him; and on the way down they met Connie at the head of the stairs and took her along with them to the dining-room. Then they had dinner, and afterward the two girls cleared the table in a twinkling, while father went down the cellar to get the tree.

In spite of its greenness and lovely fragrance, the little tree showed an unaccountable lack of balance, and an impish inclination to topple over in the direction least expected. Mr. Sheldon worked over it for some time while the girls held the tree as he directed.

"Now," he said at last, wiping his forehead, "I believe I've got it wedged so that standard can't rock like a cradle." He stepped back to view the effect, and just missed putting his foot squarely on Flaxy, who fled to Connie with a yowl of dismay.

"Goodness me! Did I hurt her?" Father walked across the room to rub the kitten's head. "I'd put her out of the room, Connie, while we trim the tree. I shall be afraid to move if she's darting around."

"Come on, Flaxy. You make your grandfather nervous," Connie said as she walked kitchenward,

cuddling the kitten. "Don't you mind if you are sent away. I'm going to give you a nice catnip ball for a Christmas present, but you can't have it to-night, darling." Whereupon Flaxy purred responsively, as though she understood every word. Connie gave her a saucer of milk, and meant to go back after a few minutes to encourage her unwilling progress down the cellar stairs, but being much absorbed for the next hour forgot all about her.

Hung with glittering baubles the little tree held up its head bravely and looked as if nothing could disturb its graceful poise.

"Isn't that lovely?" Connie stood back to gaze at it and sighed with satisfaction. "Won't Susan be pleased? She was grouchy again to-night about it."

"If I know Susan," said father, who was working over the electric attachment, "she'll say in a bored tone, 'Oh, I thought we'd have a Christmas box,' and she'll actually look disappointed." He dropped his arms for a moment to rest, and yawned sleepily. "I remember this thing bothered me just this way last year. You'd better run off to bed, Connie, or you'll go to sleep standing."

"I'm so sleepy I can't see straight," confessed Connie, going without a protest to kiss her father good-night. Then she threw her arms around Anne's neck and pressed a soft cheek against her

sister's. "You're a dear, Anne, and I think you've made us an awfully nice Christmas," she murmured unexpectedly. And Anne, returning the hug with a will, felt as if Connie had smoothed some of the wrinkles out of her hurt feelings.

"Daddy, Con is a darling, isn't she?" Anne said a few moments later. "What part of our family machine is she, do you think?"

"My conscience! I never expected to have to provide parts for the entire family." Father finished his work successfully at last, and looked at Anne in sleepy perplexity. "Perhaps Connie is the carburetor; someone has called that the 'heart of the machine.'"

Anne wrinkled her nose in disdain. "I don't like the sound of it," she said slowly. "But steering-gear isn't much better. The idea of being the 'heart of the machine' is great—and just like Connie, I do believe. Daddy, you look too tired for words. Do go to bed."

"It isn't nine o'clock yet," Mr. Sheldon said in feeble protest, "but I didn't sleep much last night. I feel as if I should drop off in a minute to-night."

"Do go this instant, then. Now that the lights are all right there's nothing more for you to do. I'll get rid of some of this clutter, and then I'll leave a light in the hall for Rose and Ellis, and go up into my room to fill stockings for the kiddies."

"That sounds a lot," murmured her father anxiously. "Are you sure you feel well enough to do all that alone?"

"It *is* a lot," laughed Anne, "particularly leaving the light. Daddy, dear, haven't you noticed that I'm getting to be a great strong thing—which is what Connie calls Rose?"

"I notice you are a particularly delightful daughter," father said with comforting emphasis, "and you're proving every day that your old Dad is a good prophet."

"I don't know about that. I'm afraid everyone doesn't think so." Anne's face lost its brightness as her mind went back to Rose and Ellis.

"Who dares dispute my opinion? Bring on the rascal. How many pounds did you tell me you've gained, Nan?"

"Three pounds in the last three weeks, the doctor said."

"A pound a week," father murmured. "Goodness gracious, girl, do you realize that, if you keep on this way, in four years you'll gain over two hundred pounds, and in twenty years it'll be half a ton. Do think it over before you start on such a career."

"I promise to stop before it gets so bad as that," laughed Anne. "Daddy, do go to bed, darling. You're beginning to talk in your sleep."

Left to herself, Anne made the room as neat as

she could, and then leaving only the light in the hall, went softly upstairs to the pleasant task of filling stockings. Her birthday check from Aunt Lucia had enabled her to buy a gift for each member of the family without asking her father for money, and enough had been left her to pay for some five and ten cent treasures which would make a great showing in the stockings.

There were only three to fill, and she made them satisfyingly plump, with interesting knobs from top to toe. At any other time she would have laughed over the queer things she put in, but, in spite of the happy evening with father, she still felt disheartened, and worked with such sober earnestness that the stockings were ready in short order.

She hung Connie's and Susan's, and found them sleeping so soundly that she didn't need to take any precautions against waking them. Jimsey, too, was curled in a bunch, with the bedclothes almost covering his head, and she stopped to straighten them, and just for an instant laid her cheek on his, and felt vaguely comforted thereby.

Going back to her own room, her quick ear caught a sound from downstairs and she leaned over the balusters to listen. At first she was sure that she heard footsteps in the living-room, and she took a step in the direction of her father's chamber. Then all she could make out was a succession of soft

thumps—four or five—with silence between. Father was so tired she hated to rouse him, and she stood, poised for flight, listening with painful intensity. The thumping sounds, still so soft that if the house had not been quiet she could scarcely have heard them, began again, this time with less of a pause between. Before Anne could decide what to do there was a curious rustle, and the faint tinkle of breaking glass.

For an instant her heart stood still, and then she realized what had happened. "It's that wretched tree down again, and probably half the ornaments are broken." She waited a moment, hoping that her father might have heard something, but his door remained shut. "I won't call him," she said, trying to stiffen her courage by telling herself that she wasn't afraid. "I'll go down myself and try to brace it up. If I can't, I'll wait for Ellis."

The light in the hall below made it easier to go down the stairs, but by the time she reached the door of the living-room it was all she could do to put her hand inside and switch on the light. At first she saw only the tree, which seemed to be stretching across the room to meet her with its shining ornaments shivered into fragments. The next instant she was terrifyingly conscious that the tree was moving—that something was crawling from beneath the branches—that in another second she

might see—she did not stop until she had reached the stairs, but there a familiar, plaintive mew made her pause and go back for another look.

It was Flaxy, of course; Flaxy, crawling out into the light and bringing in triumph the catnip ball which Connie had hung on the tree for her. "We'll make her jump for it," Connie had said, and father had agreed that it was a clever idea.

Anne's knees bent under her, and the floor being the handiest place she sat down suddenly. It was all explained now. Flaxy *had* jumped for it and that was the queer soft thumping she had heard. And the tree was down and the ornaments probably all broken.

She sat there watching Flaxy's ridiculous antics with the catnip ball, and wondering if by herself she could possibly put things to rights. And suddenly it came to her that the tree wasn't the worst of her troubles. That could be set up again, but she couldn't change what Rose and Ellis had said. "Father thinks I'm getting along all right," her mind ran on, "but he's away from home so much. It's really brothers and sisters who take the conceit out of you."

The tall clock in the corner struck the half-hour, and Anne looked up at the solemn face she had known all her life. "Half-past nine—I must do something or else go to bed." She got up with

decision, and went across the room to see if the tree had merely tipped over or whether it was broken from the standard. Flaxy, rolling in the catnip in an absurd ecstasy, looked at her with gleaming eyes and thrust out an inviting paw.

"Catch me playing with you," Anne said grimly, and crawled under the branches to find out what the damage really was. To her joy she found that the tree had only been pulled over by the kitten's repeated tugging, and that some of the ornaments, at least, were unharmed.

"Now, what am I going to do?" she questioned, getting up with her hair pulled about her face by the clutching fingers of the tree. "Shall I ——" and then her heart went down into her boots again, for she had heard a faint tinkle of the front door-bell, and it was too early for Rose and Ellis.

Her first thought was to run to father, but in order to reach the stairs she must pass the front door. She took a hesitating step, and then, to her inexpressible relief, heard distinctly, "It's Mrs. Parkes; don't be frightened."

"I—I was never so glad in my life to hear anyone's voice," Anne said with a catch in her throat as she opened the door for her neighbor, who stepped in, arms full of parcels. "I—I'm scared stiff."

"You poor little thing. It is late for callers, but I saw a light. I rang softly, so's not to wake anyone, and then something made me think I'd better speak. I brought over these parcels for your Christmas box." By this time Mrs. Parkes was in the living-room and had taken in the scene with one of her comprehensive glances. "O-ho! So you did decide to have a tree after all," she said with a sidelong look at Anne.

There was something about her tone that gave Anne the usual resentful feeling. "I didn't know it till just to-night," she answered in quick defense. "The box was ready, but at the last minute father couldn't stand it not to have a tree, and he brought one—and we trimmed it—and he went to bed—and now look at it." It was such a relief to be able to tell her troubles that Anne's spirits rose somewhat, and she managed to smile. "Flaxy couldn't wait till morning for her present, you see." She pointed to the cat, who after the first alarm of Mrs. Parkes' entrance had again rolled on her back, and was alternately hugging the ball and fighting it with teeth and claws.

"You ridiculous wretch!" Mrs. Parkes prodded Flaxy with the toe of her shoe and made her prance wildly. "You've done enough mischief for one night." Then she turned to the tree. "Now let's see what we can do for this," she said in such a

calm, assured tone that Anne felt all at once helped and rested.

"Now, if you don't mind, I'll telephone Mr. Parkes to bring over a box of Christmas ornaments that we've had put away since our last tree. They're not so up-to-date as yours, but they'll do to fill in. And while we're waiting for him, let's put the cat to bed."

Anne felt almost as if she were under military orders, everything went so swiftly and precisely from that moment. Flaxy was tucked down the cellar stairs with all that was left of her Christmas gift; Mr. Parkes arrived with the box of ornaments and a ball of cord which his wife had been thoughtful enough to order. And then, seeing how tired and pale Anne looked, Mrs. Parkes propped her up with pillows on the couch and bade her watch while they worked.

"This is such fun for me," Mrs. Parkes said, coming across the room after awhile to speak to Anne. "I'd sit up all night for the sake of trimming a Christmas tree. My goodness, John Parkes, they won't be able to get out those knots you're tying until next Christmas."

Mr. Parkes, a quiet man who never had much chance to talk, went placidly on, making the tree fast according to his own ideas, but a little later, when his wife was busy, he sauntered over to the

couch. "Some worker, isn't she?" he said with a prideful twinkle in his eye. "You know really she's just crazy over girls and boys, particularly girls," he went on, lowering his voice confidentially. "If you ever want her to help you, or to teach you anything she'd be tickled to death." The last words came in a hurry, for Mrs. Parkes was again coming across the room.

"Don't wear Anne out talking to her," she said with a laugh. "The poor lamb's tired, and she's been scared half to death twice to-night." She stooped to tuck an afghan around Anne's feet and cuddled them, half-unconsciously, in the process.

Anne, lying there quite still for the next ten minutes, felt that she was seeing things with new eyes. For the first time she was really liking this neighbor of theirs, and not minding her queer, sharp ways. What if she should ask Mrs. Parkes to teach her something about cooking—the thought flashed into her mind with convincing force. She could never learn from Effie, who did not like to teach, and never seemed to know just why she did certain things, nor what quantities she used. "Three months ago I hated the thought of cooking and housework," Anne said to herself, "and now I truthfully—honestly—want to learn, I do believe."

"Did Rose's cape look all right to you?" Mrs. Parkes asked, bringing Anne back to her surround-

ings with startling suddenness. "I was so glad to have her ask me to help her," she went on without waiting for a reply. "She's such a cute thing and she looked like a picture in that cape and hood. I declare I just envy folks who have girls to fuss over."

There was a wistful note in her voice that touched Anne, and involuntarily she tucked her hand into the plump one that was absent-mindedly smoothing the afghan.

"What a cold little fist," Mrs. Parkes said, and then she stopped and looked at Anne half-expectantly, as if she could see that the girl wanted to say something.

"I wonder if you'd mind fussing over me a little," Anne asked shakily. It was dreadful to be asking a favor of someone when you hadn't been nice to her in your mind and had held her off at arm's length. "I—I wonder if you'd teach me something about cooking."

"Bless your heart, I'd love to. When will you begin? You can come to my house, and I'll teach you to make all sorts of things, and John Parkes shall eat them and tell us if they're good."

Anne laughed and felt that some of her trials were going to turn into blessings. "Would you mind if we didn't tell anyone else about it?" she questioned, "just until I get so I can do a little

something. You see, Rose and Ellis love to tease me, and I—well, I don't always take it very pleasantly."

"We'll never mention it until we can give them a spread cooked to the queen's taste," answered Mrs. Parkes. "Come in and see me as soon as you can and we'll plan it. And now look at your tree."

She stepped from in front of Anne just as Mr. Parkes snapped on the lights, and once more the little tree stood in beauty and flaunted its sparkling ornaments. Quiet Mr. Parkes had found a broom without troubling Anne, and had swept up the broken glass and twigs, and now he stood back and surveyed his work with pleasure.

"I bet Sheldon won't even know that happened," he was saying as he came over to where Anne was struggling out of the enveloping afghan. "You've got that father of yours going about you, Anne," he remarked unexpectedly. "He thinks you're about the finest thing ever to help him keep the family running so smoothly."

"Oh, dear, but I don't," Anne faltered. "I know he thinks I do, and that worries me, but Rose and Ellis know better, and they miss Aunt Lucia dreadfully, and I can't blame them for that, because I do myself, and I have tried, but I can't seem to remember all the little things she used to do." With which long and somewhat mixed statement,

Anne paused and looked at them with troubled eyes.

"Well, if you're worrying about that you should have heard Rose when she was at my house this morning." Mrs. Parkes turned away from Anne to have her husband hold her coat, but she kept on talking just the same. "She told me a lot about what you've been doing, and she says she and Ellis think you're just a wonder, but they wouldn't tell you for fear of making you conceited. Careful of them, isn't it?" Her laugh, which so many times had grated on Anne's ears, was sweetest music now.

"Come on, John, and let this tired child go to bed before those youngsters get home from the party and wake her up. I've put my little presents in the box with the others; the one for you is a medicine I hope you'll take freely—and if not the right size I'll exchange it."

"I didn't know medicine came in different sizes," Anne laughed. The next moment a miracle happened, for she put both arms around Mrs. Parkes' neck, and kissed her—and liked doing it.

"Thank you a thousand times for helping me to-night. I don't know what I should have done without you and Mr. Parkes," she murmured shyly.

Mrs. Parkes' face grew very gentle and she returned the hug warmly. "Remember our secret

cooking-club," she reminded, as they went out of the door, and then she put her head in again, and said softly—just like a girl, Anne thought, " Come over."

CHAPTER XII

A DIFFERENT ANNE

When Anne had time to think it over she decided that in some ways this was one of the happiest Christmas Days she could remember. In spite of the fact that she missed Aunt Lucia from beginning to end, there was a great satisfaction in feeling that she, herself, was helping the family wheels to revolve smoothly and in the right direction. And, to her surprise, the others seemed to think so, too, and showed it in various ways.

Mrs. Parkes' "medicine," on which was written "To be taken in frequent doses," proved to be a pair of shining skates, and Anne blessed the half-hours of practice she had had in the attic, for they had given her confidence in her ability to learn some of the sports she had for so long ignored. Thanks to that, she didn't feel herself quite so stupid when father took her out on Christmas afternoon, and supported, guided and encouraged during a trying hour. Ellis gave up the most of one vacation after-

noon to her, and Rose offered heaps of advice, but was too impatient to be of real service as a teacher.

All through a cold January the days slipped by so fast that Anne could scarcely account for them. At least four times a week she spent a part of the morning with Mrs. Parkes, and in a surprisingly short time she began to feel that oven and mixing-bowl and ingredients were no longer terrifying mysteries, to be approached with a sinking heart, but were ready to give delightful response if properly managed.

After her arduous mornings it was a joy to spend the early afternoon on the little pond where few came at that time. Anne found that teaching herself was the most successful way, and it was not long before she loved the swift motion, and the keen, crisp air. It gave her such an appetite that she began to think she might sometime weigh that half a ton father had predicted.

Frequently, on the way home, she dropped in to see Roberta, who exclaimed over her glowing cheeks and bright eyes, and then quickly changed the subject for fear Anne would urge her to exercise also. Sometimes, as if there were an unconscious influence at work, Anne would find her pacing the length of the piazza in the winter sunshine, and, when they went up to Miss Bobby's room, its little

mistress was apt to be unreasonable and to act as if Anne had actually made her do something against her will. For some reason Anne felt surprisingly patient with it all; perhaps, because she could remember how she used to feel when Rose scolded her for not wanting to exercise.

So the first month of the year flew by, and February began its blustering progress.

"Anne, do you know what it will be a week from to-day?" Connie asked on the first Saturday in February. They were in Anne's room and she was sewing some buttons on Connie's dress.

"Why, the fourteenth of February, I s'pose. Is it a puzzle?" Anne answered warily, and knew at once by her sister's disappointed expression that she had missed the idea entirely. "Oh, I know. It's Valentine's Day—and your birthday. Let's have a party. Shall we?"

"Would you? Could I? Do you think we might?" Connie wriggled dress and needle out of Anne's grasp in her effort to face her. "Oh, excuse me, but, Anne, darling, we haven't had a real party since—since you've been taking care of us."

Anne almost asked her to say the last words over again, she found them so delightful. Instead, she turned her sister around, hunted up her needle and went on sewing. "I think Daddy and—and Effie would be perfectly willing," she said slowly. "Of

course you must ask Effie, because she'd have to do most of the work for it. And, Con, I'm sure it would have to be a small party."

"I don't like big parties." Connie was standing very still now so that the sewing might be finished quickly. From her point of view it was no fun to talk to a person unless you could look at her. "And I don't want just children. I can play with girls and boys any day. What I'd really like ——"

"There, that's done." Anne cut her thread and gave her sister a final pat to signify that the ordeal was over. "Now turn around and let's talk it over."

"What I'd really like," began Connie again, settling down in a chair near her sister, "is a grown-up dinner party. You know what I mean. We'd be all dressed up, and we'd talk a little before dinner, and then we'd have soup and salad and ice-cream—with something in between, of course, and—and 'specially place-cards." She waited a moment for Anne to get used to the idea and then added calmly, "You may laugh if you want. I don't mind. Rose and Ellis will probably laugh their heads off if they ever hear of it."

"Why, I think I shall like it. Have you planned who the guests will be?" Anne wouldn't for anything have hurt Connie's feelings.

"Well, I s'pose I'd want Louise, because she's

my best chum, and next to her I'd like to ask Mr. Darling. Don't you remember he said he didn't have any family to go home to? He promised to come and have dinner with us some time, and I don't believe you've ever asked him."

"So we haven't." Anne felt conscience-stricken, for Mr. Darling had given them the happy afternoon which had brought to her the cherished watch. For an instant the whole picture was in her mind—the launching of the "Alice Bell," the stern man who had told her about the little girl of whom he had been fond, the shipyard, with its hurrying workmen, the pleasant boy who had helped her—to-day it all seemed like a dream or something she had read about.

"Daddy was going to ask him," she went on absent-mindedly, still wrapped in her memories. "But, Connie, do you suppose a grown-up man would want to come to a little girl's party?"

"He can be invited. And, anyway, I'll be twelve." Connie evidently thought the last statement settled any objection as to age.

Anne looked at her sister admiringly. "You've thought it all out, haven't you? Weren't you going to say anything about a party if Daddy or I didn't?"

"Well"—Connie took a deep breath—"I didn't know but a dinner-party—with place-cards, you

know—might cost too much. Anyway, I thought I could have fun planning it." Her brown eyes gazed into the far distance for an instant; then she returned to her subject with a brisk "Next, I thought I'd invite Roberta. Do you believe she'd come?"

"I'm sure of it if she's well enough." Anne was scribbling names on a piece of paper. "Louise—Mr. Darling—Roberta—who next?"

"Auntie Parkes." Connie eyed her sister somewhat doubtfully as she said this name. "I—I'm afraid you don't like her very well, but she's awfully nice to me. The other day she taught me how to make peanut brittle."

"Afraid I don't like her?" Anne began in amazement, and then remembered that neither Connie nor any of the others knew of the mornings spent with Mrs. Parkes, nor that the old dislike had changed to a much pleasanter feeling. "Oh, yes, I like her," she went on quickly. "I—I'm getting quite fond of her. Down goes Auntie Parkes on the list."

"I'm glad. I used to feel all prickles when you were at home and she came in, but now I don't, so I knew there must be a difference," Connie concluded, nodding her head wisely. "Now the next one is the last one. I'm afraid this time you won't say 'Down goes.'"

"Why not?" Anne waited with pencil poised.

"Well ——" Connie hesitated and began again. "You remember that little boy I talked to—the one who was sitting all wrapped up on the piazza where the Maynards used to live. I've spoken to him two or three times, and he's a stranger, and he seems awfully lonesome, and I'd like to invite him."

"But, Con, you don't know anything about him. Are you sure that he is a little boy? You haven't even heard his name." Anne hated to dim this enthusiasm for making others happy, but she did not believe her father would agree to this.

"That makes it all the more mysterious," said Connie, answering her sister's last statement first. "I shall put on the envelope, 'To the boy in the steamer-chair,' and then I'll give it to him myself so's to make sure. Of course I don't know whether he's little or not," she went on dubiously. "He's so buried in blankets I can't tell where his feet stop. And he wears big, black-looking glasses, and his cap is pulled way down. I never can guess anybody's age—he might be twenty or he might be ten; his voice is kind of covered up, too, so I can't tell by that, but I should judge he's 'bout my age."

"I don't see," Anne was beginning helplessly, but Connie interrupted with her last argument which she had been saving for a clincher.

"Louise's father says they're very nice people,

and that they've taken the Maynard house 'cause they have to be away from the city, but near the doctor. The—the grandfather's got rheumatism, and the boy's been ill, and now his eyes hurt him. And they have a man cook, and a man nurse and a—another man that writes for the grandfather, and there isn't a woman in the house to make things pleasant for them," Connie ended breathlessly.

Anne laughed, but sympathized in her heart with this boy who had no woman to make things pleasant. "Rose always says it takes you to find out about people, but I think you'll have to wait and ask Daddy about this."

"Of course. And you're a perfect darling to want me to have the party." Connie gave her sister an ecstatic hug that left her breathless. "Anyway, I don't believe the steamer-chair boy will come, but I thought it would please him to know he's wanted. I'll go now and ask Effie what she thinks about it all."

Effie proved not only willing but interested, and father, though somewhat amused by the choice of guests, thought even the invitation to the boy in the steamer-chair would be all right.

"It will probably amuse the poor little chap," he confided to Anne, "and perhaps make him feel that there are friendly neighbors in the town. If I can remember it I'll find out the name in some

way." But father, who was unusually interested just now in a book about gardens, read even on his way to the office, and never thought of his promise again.

Connie, still feeling the joy of mystery, took pains not to find out, and delivered her invitation just as she had planned. Then, stormy weather intervening, she did not go around by the Maynard house again until after the party.

By Friday afternoon the weather got tired of its own bad behavior, and a genial sun appeared that seemed all at once to make over the world. Connie, running out just before bedtime to say good-night to the stars, came in again full of joy-shivers. "How you can sit around a hot lamp I don't see," she announced disapprovingly. "The stars are just winking and blinking, and the air—well, it's cold, but there's something about it makes you think of gardens."

"Gardens?" Daddy pulled his eyes off his book for an instant to look at Connie's glowing face. "Gardens! I must go out and sniff that air." Then his glance caught an interesting sentence, and he was lost again.

"The stars are promising me good weather for to-morrow," Connie went on happily; "they would like to come to the party, but they'll be too busy."

"Con, I think you're getting too old to—to make up things like that." Rose eyed her younger sister critically. "People might think you really believed them—and you'll be twelve to-morrow."

"I know it." Connie was secretly wondering whether anyone could be guilty of forgetting her own birthday. "But, if you want to know, I'm never going to be too old to say those things. The stars are some of the friendliest friends I own, and I love 'em."

"All right. Have it your own way." Rose, who was sitting on the arm of Ellis' chair, went back with a shrug to the contemplation of her brother's stamp-book. "Here, El, that green one goes on this page," she said, and then, under her breath, "Fancy talking about owning the stars!"

"But I do own them—my part of 'em," persisted Connie, who could not lightly give up the belief of all her years. "And I can own the moon, and sunsets and soft, little breezes and—and everything beautiful. Don't *you* know I can, Anne?"

"I—I'm beginning to know," Anne said hesitatingly, and then with a rush, "Connie, you used to say 'my moon' and 'my tars' when you were beginning to talk. Probably you knew then that they were yours." She was smiling, but there was

a look in her eye that reassured Connie, who drew a breath of relief.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, Anne, don't you get foolish, too," Rose begged. "I should hate to belong to a queer family."

Connie felt that she could ignore this last remark. "I'm glad someone understands," she murmured with a glance at Anne, as she went across the room to kiss her father good-night. "You'd better kiss me two times to-night, Daddy," she assured him solemnly, "for to-morrow you won't have any 'leven-year-old daughter."

"Do you expect to be much changed, darling? I like you very much as you are," Daddy answered with an anxiety that seemed real. "Just see this picture of a beautiful garden, Connie. Don't you think you and I might plan something for our garden like this?"

Anne, looking at the two of them as they bent over the book, felt a certain wistfulness in her father's voice, and wished she could give him time, and everything he needed, to make gardens. Daddy's mind seemed always to be planning houses and gardens; but instead of making them he had to be shut up in an office.

It was the next morning, when Anne and Connie were polishing silver, that a surprise came which threatened to turn everything topsy-turvy. Effie

went to the door to answer the bell, and came back with an open telegram in her hand, and a face so pale that the freckles stood out oddly.

"It's my brother—my only brother," she said, sinking into a chair as though her knees would not support her. "I'll have to git there as quick as I can—I've pulled him through one awful sickness—mebbe I can this time." She was fumbling with her apron-strings, and she dragged the knot to the front and worked at it with fingers grown suddenly helpless.

"I'll do that," said Connie, and there was something in her voice and manner that shook Anne alive again. Just the sight of the telegram and Effie's stricken face had sent her thoughts flying to Daddy and Aunt Lucia, and for a moment she could not move.

"Drink this, Effie." She brought a glass of water and put it into the shaking hands. "I'm sure just to have you there will make your brother better."

"P'r'aps. He always did depend on me." Effie was getting control of herself now, and there was a hint of color coming back into her cheeks. "His wife's got three little children to take care of as well as him, so I'll have to go right away. I hate to leave you, though."

"Oh, we'll get along all right," Anne said with

superb assurance, though she still felt a little dizzy with the shock, and her knees were shaking. "We shall miss you every minute, of course, but don't you worry about us."

"Perhaps he'll get well so fast you won't have to stay long," Connie comforted, her brown eyes full of sympathy.

"I hope so." Effie's eyes filled with tears, but she whisked them away promptly, and almost the next minute seemed like her capable self again. She took one look at the work-filled kitchen and shook her head despairingly. Then she started up the back stairs.

"Ef I don't lose a minute I b'lieve I can git that 'leven o'clock train," she called back.

"Connie, you and I'll put up a lunch for her," Anne said, "and she must drink a cup of tea before she goes."

"I'll put the water on to boil." Connie longed fiercely for something to do every minute of the time until Effie should be on her way. No one could be more sorry than she was—she felt sure of that, and she wanted her to go—she wouldn't keep her a minute if she could. But down deep in her mind something—something very tiresome—kept saying over and over, "Party! How about your party now? You may as well give up your party," and so on—persistent, irritating, shame-

less. Connie put the kettle on the stove and sat herself down in a chair with a thud that startled Anne.

"I'm only sitting on a thought," she explained calmly, and an instant later, after screwing around in the chair as if she were crushing the life out of something harmful, she got up with almost a satisfied gleam in her eye, and made herself Anne's willing slave for the time that remained.

"Well," said Anne, turning away from the window from which they had waved a good-by to Effie, "I do hope the poor thing will get there in time to make her brother well. And now, I suppose, we've got to think about ourselves."

"Yes." Connie's answer was so subdued that her sister looked around at her quickly.

"I believe you're thinking that you're not going to have any party, but you are," she asserted, with a little flirt of her head. She was of a sudden gay and mysterious and bold; a creature quite different from the Anne of four months back. Connie felt all at once comforted and sure of pleasant things to come.

"Oh, Anne," she breathed, "do you really think I can?"

"Of course." Anne looked about her with the eye of a conqueror and thought hard. "Fortunately Effie cleaned yesterday—and—m-m-m—if

you'll just finish these spoons, Connie, while I run over and have a council of war with Mrs. Parkes, we'll get the machinery started in no time."

From that moment Connie lived in a sort of daze from which she emerged at intervals to realize that Anne and Mrs. Parkes were spending most of the day in the kitchen, and that Anne seemed to be doing a great many things which were wonderful and unexpected.

Rose appeared about three o'clock, and was full of dismay over Effie's departure. "Oh, goodness, I s'pose that means heaps of dishwashing," she lamented. "You might have 'phoned me, though. I'm not such a pig that I wouldn't have come home to help."

"Well, you said at breakfast that you thought parties were a bore—and, to tell the truth, I was so busy that it never occurred to me to send for you." Anne went out into the kitchen for something, and Rose opened wide eyes at Connie.

"Deary me! How lofty and important we are all of a sudden. I see where little Rose better get busy, too, unless she wants her head taken right off. Anything I can do to help you now, Nan?" she ended, poking her head into the kitchen.

"Yes, a lot." Anne came back into the dining-room and looked anxiously at the clock. "Now, Connie, I hate to ask you, because it's your party,

but if you'll only see that Susan and Jim are clean and ready."

"I should say I would—after all you've done. We'll have to be dressed pretty early, because the invitations say half-past four, don't they?"

"Yes," answered Anne patiently. "And, Con, unless you actually have to, please don't come into the dining-room again, nor let the children come."

"I promise," responded Connie with shining eyes, and solemnly left the room.

"And now, Rose, if you'll only help me set the table. I believe you're the very one to get me out of my troubles—you always think so quickly what to do."

Rose gave a sharp glance, but could see nothing but sincerity in her sister's eyes. "Glory! She sounds actually grateful," she said to herself, and her cheeks grew hot. "I'm a disgusting slacker to go off and stay so long without finding out whether they needed me to help." And while she was thinking this her voice was saying with unusual gentleness, "I'll put my things away and be ready in a jiffy, Nan. I'll help every minute from now on. I—well, I'll even wash dishes if you want."

CHAPTER XIII

NEAR THE KING-ROW

At half-past four Louise arrived promptly, and was escorted upstairs by Connie and Susan. Anne, hurrying down to see Esther Dookins, who was to serve dinner, called back a warning to Rose to finish dressing as soon as possible.

Before she reached the bottom of the stairs she heard an automobile stop in front of the house, and someone came up the walk and rang the bell. It flashed into her mind that this might be Connie's unknown friend from whom they had heard nothing since the invitation was delivered, and she felt some of her old shyness about meeting a stranger. When she opened the door, she was still more embarrassed to find, not a little boy, but a tall one, with collar turned up and cap pulled down, and dark glasses shading the only visible portion of his face.

For an instant neither spoke. Then, just as Anne was trying to manage, "How do you do," or something equally original, the boy began to chuckle.

"This *is* you, isn't it?" he said half-doubtfully. "For a second I couldn't believe my goggles. Now I know why the name sounded familiar—I'm an awful chump about remembering names—but I can't see why I didn't recognize your sister when she first spoke to me. Don't you know me now? It's unkind of you not to, because I remember you perfectly."

"Well, I—I'm not disguised."

"That's one on me." The boy's jolly laugh flung knowledge of him into Anne's grasp.

"Why, you're the Alice Bell boy!"

"Well, I was never called a bell-boy before, but you've got the idea."

"I don't see why you didn't remember Connie. She was there."

"Of course she was. But it's quite a large family to take in at one time. And I had to look at you, because you were the leading lady, and—and you were different from most of the girls I know."

"Oh," Anne wondered whether this was a compliment or not. Then her cheeks grew hot—"Do come in," she said hastily. "Excuse me for keeping you on the porch all this time. I'm too surprised to be polite."

"You're all right. And now I know what family this is I'm very sorry I can't come to the party. You see, for the next week or two the doctor won't

let me go where there's a bright light. I can't even take off my cap to you now for fear of disturbing those beastly glasses.

"I—I hope you'll excuse me for not replying to the invitation," the boy went on contritely. "I do know better, but Uncle's all tied up with rheumatism, and my eyes have been on the blink for weeks, and—well, of course, there isn't any real excuse; I've just let things slide. So please ask Miss Connie not to be too hard on me and to accept this."

"I will, and she won't—I mean she will—that is, she'll be dreadfully disappointed because you can't stay and—and so am I," Anne finished frankly as she took the package. "Do come again as soon as you can."

"I will, and couldn't you go for a walk with me some day? It would be an e-nor-mous favor. I'm so tired of not having any young people to talk to."

"Yes, I'd like to," Anne answered without hesitation, and never dreamed that in the boy's mind she was being written down as a girl who had no nonsense about her and wasn't afraid to be friendly.

"Good-by. I'm afraid I've frozen you keeping you here so long. I shall be in bad with the family if I make you catch cold." The boy put out his hand, and the hearty handshake seemed to imply both repentance and friendliness. Then he went back to the waiting automobile.

Anne, turning from shutting the door, almost stepped on Rose, who was standing behind her.

"For the land's sake, who is it that thinks it's such an e-normous favor for you to go to walk with him?" demanded Rose almost in a whisper.

"You can speak out loud. He's probably a quarter of a mile away by this time," Anne laughed. "Wait till I call Con to open her package."

Connie came flying at the summons, with Louise and Susan at her heels, and Jim appeared from some secluded corner.

"Oh," said Connie, her eyes very big, "I didn't think anyone would bring me a present."

"That's what you have parties for," said Susan, looking with envious eyes at the parcel, and hoping earnestly that it was something she could share.

Connie unwrapped it, holding her breath. First came to view red tissue-paper, then white, and at last a red, heart-shaped box of generous size. On the corner was a lacy valentine, the center of which was a large red rose. A dangling heart bore this rhyme:

"Sweets to the sweet,
The saying goes,
And these I hope are fine.
Would you know my name?
Just ask the rose
To say who's your Valentine."

"Isn't that be-yu-ti-ful?" sighed Connie, gazing at it lovingly, and apparently on the point of reading it all over again.

"Connie Sheldon, if you don't tell me quick who sent you that I shall take it away from you and find out." Rose's hands were almost on the box in pursuance of her threat, but Connie whirled away from her, poking her fingers tenderly under the rose and extracting a tiny card.

"Birthday greetings from—Archi-bald Brad-ley Junior," she read slowly. "Why—why, Anne, that's the boy we saw at the shipyard."

"Yes," said Anne smiling, "and it's his uncle who is ill, not his grandfather, and he's coming around to see us—Archie, I mean, not his uncle; and he remembers you now, Connie. And—oh dear ——"

"What's the matter?" demanded Rose.

Anne looked worried. "I ought to have sent word to his uncle that my little watch keeps good time, and I love it."

"I guess he won't lose any sleep over it," Rose said with such cheerful unconcern that Anne felt foolish. "By this time he's probably forgotten all about giving you the watch."

"O-ooh!" Connie had put the box on the table and was gently lifting the cover. "Aren't they lovely—each one in a little crinkled nest. I'm go-

ing to shut it up again so Daddy can see it before it's touched. Wouldn't you?"

"No," said Rose and Susan, and "Yes," said Anne, but Connie had the cover on in a twinkling, and held it in place with two firm little thumbs which seemed to settle the question.

They had been so busy over the box that no one heard another automobile drive up, and on the porch, stealthy steps which came and went again. So, when there was a sudden sharp ring of the bell, everyone jumped and hesitated an insant.

Connie reached the door first, and when she flung it open the hall light fell full on a friendly anxious face, then on a tawny back, and a tail whose every wag meant comradeship. Around the fluffy white neck was a broad red ribbon, and from this dangled an envelope addressed to "Miss Constance Sheldon."

Inside was a valentine, and again Connie read the lines with slow impressiveness, her brown eyes very serious.

"All my folks have gone away;
May I come to you and stay?
I'll be faithful, kind and true,
I'll work very hard for you.
If I could, my name I'd sign,
But I'm only your loving Valentine."

"Oh, you darling," Connie said, and at the

"DO YOU THINK HE COULD BE REALLY MINE?"

words there was the sound of someone moving on the porch, and a plump gentleman in a big coat stepped into the hall.

"Mean me?" he asked, beaming impartially on the little group. "I thought I heard my name."

"Oh, Mr. Darling," cried Connie, recognizing him at once. "I was talking to the dog. Isn't he a beauty?"

"Dog by the name of Darling?" queried that gentleman quite as if he knew nothing about it. "Pleased to meet you, sir. Shake!" Whereupon, to Connie's intense gratification, the beautiful collie lifted his paw and laid it in the outstretched hand. And then he shook hands with all of them, and father and Ellis coming in at that moment, he bestowed upon them a friendly paw.

"Do you think he could be really mine?" asked Connie in an awestruck voice.

"Well, you see it's this way, Miss Connie," Mr. Darling rattled on as he was getting out of his motor-coat. "It's just as he says in his valentine. His friends have broken up housekeeping and they gave him to me. But my shanty is only a city flat, and he didn't take kindly to it. Neither did the people below us feel happy when he took exercise, or got excited, did they, old chap?" By this time they were all in the living-room, and Mr. Darling

was fondling the silky head, laid so confidingly upon his knee.

"So just about the time your invitation came I had a heart-to-heart talk with him," Mr. Darling continued. "And I said to him, 'It's too bad, but what shall we do about it?' and he thought for a minute and then he said, 'I'm sorry to leave you, but do you know a brown-haired girl with brown eyes who would like such a pal as I should be?' And I remembered you, and I said, 'I know a girl that would suit you to a dot.'

"'Lead me to her,' he said, and so"—Mr. Darling chuckled in spite of himself at the sight of Susan's face—"so here we are."

"Huh!" ejaculated Susan, staring at him sternly. "Huh! Dogs can't talk."

"Well, now that's the biggest mistake of your young life if you think this one can't. Why, he can talk in several different ways—with his eyes and his paws and his soft, cold nose, and his tail—oh, mostly with his tail. Look at him, now; do you know what he's saying?"

Susan shook her head. She was a little afraid of dogs, and she was not sure she was glad this present had come to Connie.

The collie had gone across the room and had put one paw on Connie's knee, and was looking up at her with his soft eyes as if he knew

her for his mistress and were promising service.

"He's saying, 'I like you, Connie, and any time you want to go for a walk I'm your friend. And if you should ever be so kind as to throw a stick I'll bring it back to you.' Why, it's just as clear as mud that that's what he's saying." Mr. Darling's eyes were fixed on Susan as he ended, and he suddenly snapped his fingers.

"By jolly, that dog's reminded me of something I came pretty near forgetting. You see, I was just going to say that he's a good watch-dog, and that made me remember that I have a little present for Susan." He pulled a small package out of his pocket and handed it to her. "The dog thinks that's something you wanted the first time we met."

Susan opened it doubtfully. It was a watch, shining and resplendent, with a long chain, and a screw at the top which made the hands go when one wound it.

Susan's eyes widened. "Ho!" she said with a sudden deep chuckle. "A watch-dog made you think of a watch—for me. De-ah Mr. Darling!"

Anne slipping out of the room just then under cover of the talk and laughter, went to the kitchen to see how things were progressing, and found Mrs. Parkes giving last instructions to Esther Dookins.

"I was afraid you wouldn't have any time, Anne,

so I slipped in the back way for a look, and everything's going beautifully. I'm proud of my pupil."

"Well, I never could have done anything without you," Anne answered gratefully. "I'm so sorry Mr. Parkes had to be travelling just at this time. He doesn't know that he's missing my first dinner-party. But now come in and meet Mr. Darling, and Connie's beautiful dog.

"I had so much to help me." Anne paused on her way through the dining-room to look fondly at the pretty table. "As soon as Roberta got her invitation she came in to say that she was sorry she couldn't be here, and she begged me to use this centrepiece that she had once for a valentine party."

Mrs. Parkes gazed admiringly at the centrepiece, which was a gleaming boat with high curved prow, and gilded masts from which hung many small golden hearts. It rode proudly on a mirror lake, and the banks were mossy green and dotted with gay flowers. A mischief-making Cupid, armed with bow and quiver, stood in the prow and held the reins over stately swans.

"Well, isn't that the cutest thing?" she said after a prolonged survey. "And your table looks lovely with all the silver so bright. And what's this dangling ——"

"Sh!" Anne pulled her away from the table and toward the door into the hall. "You were not

supposed to see that—even Rose doesn't know about that, and she helped me fix the table."

Mrs. Parkes stopped suddenly and put both hands on Anne's shoulders. "Anne, you're smarter than I thought you were," she said earnestly, quite oblivious of how much her words might imply.

"It isn't being particularly smart when you have someone to stand right back of you and help," Anne answered, but she was pleased, nevertheless. Praise was worth a great deal when one had to work so hard to deserve it, she was thinking, as they went into the living-room.

Here there was great excitement. Mr. Darling had declared that Connie was altogether too grown up in her notions, and that he should not call it a party without a game. So they had started Musical Chairs, with Rose at the piano playing a stirring march and stopping at the most unexpected times. Even the collie, looking interested, and as if he knew all about it, was walking around the chairs with the others, and now, to Connie's inexpressible delight, he jumped into a chair before Mr. Darling could get it. Unfortunately, being a trifle rough in his methods, he came violently in contact with Susan, who, to her great disgust, sat suddenly on the floor.

"That settles it," said Mr. Darling, picking her up before she had time to wink. "We can't have

our feelings hurt that way, can we? Come here, Rex, and make your excuses. Shake!"

The dog pawed the air anxiously, and Susan managed to put out a limp hand.

"There, peace is made. Didn't you tell me, Ellis, that we could make up a bed for this chap in the cellar?"

"Yes, sir. It's all ready, and there are some bones waiting for him. Father and I went down while you were talking."

"What a little talker I am. I never even missed you. Come on, Rex, you and Ellis and I will hike to the cellar."

"I wanted to name him 'Darling,'" Connie said pensively, "but Rose says it would be foolish."

"I should say as much," agreed Anne. "I could never call him that if I wanted to scold him. Besides, Rex means king."

"Well, kings aren't very—very stylish these days," persisted Connie, "but I'm going to make this one have a good time. What's that you're whispering about, Louise? Say it out loud."

Connie's chum, a shy, quiet little girl, was plainly distressed at being pulled before the public so suddenly.

"I—I said that you'd had two surprises—and—and things usually come in threes—and—er—p'r'aps you'd get another."

"Oh, no, I couldn't," Connie said with conviction. She looked around the room and shook her head. "I couldn't possibly. Everybody's come that's coming." But, as the last word left her lips, the bell rang again.

"I'll go," and "It isn't for me," Rose and Connie said at the same instant. "It's only a piece of paper," asserted the unbelieving Susan, who had been fooled several times that day.

Anne, not far behind Rose, heard a dimly-remembered voice ask, "May I speak to Miss Anne Sheldon a moment?" and could not trust her ears. She had a sudden queer feeling that her sister would fling the door wide, and that there would be a blare of trumpets, and she should see ——

"I'll speak to her," Rose held the door open about an inch, and spoke in a cold, unwelcoming voice quite unlike her usual one.

There was no need to speak, for with three steps Anne was there, the interfering door was flung back, and she was gazing eagerly into eyes which met her own with cordial welcome.

"I—I thought I knew your voice," she gasped. "Come right in. Daddy, Rose, all of you, it's my Miss Graham."

Miss Graham laughed delightfully, and stepped into the hall. In her long fur coat, with a small hat pulled down almost to her sparkling eyes,

she looked to Anne's ardent fancy like a princess.

"I'm afraid I'm intruding," she said as she pulled off a thick glove to shake hands with everyone. "I'm here quite unexpectedly for over Sunday, and I couldn't bear to go away without taking one look at my girl."

Her arm went around Anne as she spoke, and Anne snuggled close to the fur coat feeling intense happiness in the fact that at last her family would know what a wonderful friend had dropped out of the skies for her benefit. She was glad when Mr. Darling and Ellis appeared and were introduced.

"Oh, couldn't you stay for my party?" Connie urged, saying just the right thing, as she so often did. "It would be perfect if you only would."

There was a chorus of persuasion, and Anne loved the way in which Daddy said, "Please let me go out and tell your friends that you will come a little later, Miss Graham." And Mr. Darling added, "My car is at your disposal whenever you feel you must go." As for Anne, herself, she was quite speechless except for her entreating eyes and manner.

"I—I suppose I ought to go with them," Miss Graham hesitated, and then Jim, who had been hovering in the background, crept close and laid a persuasive hand on her arm. "Please stay; I want

you to," he said softly, and to fanciful Anne a spark of understanding seemed to flash from his eyes to Miss Graham's.

"I will stay. I'd love it," she agreed impulsively, and then Anne escorted her upstairs in triumph, while Daddy went out to the automobile to talk to her friends, and Mrs. Parkes retired to the kitchen to see if everything was ready to be served. Like the wise woman she was, she knew that Anne, floating on rosy clouds of unexpected bliss, could not be expected to think of anything so commonplace as dinner.

Ten minutes later Connie walked into the dining-room on the arm of Mr. Darling, whom she had chosen for her escort. It made no difference to her that the others of the party were not behaving so formally, and she was serenely scornful of Rose and Ellis, who were laughing at her for being a "ridiculous kid." This was her idea of a grown-up party, and she was carrying it out to suit her fancy.

"Find your own place-cards, please," called Anne, who was coming out of her rapt state sufficiently to attend to some details. "Miss Graham, you won't mind if yours is labeled 'The Steamer-Chair Boy,' will you?"

"I shan't mind anything except not having any supper," Jean Graham answered lightly. The removal of the fur coat had disclosed a dress of soft,

dull blue, and under the electric light her eyes were a warm brown, and the thick hair, which curved softly about her face, was bronze in color.

"I can't see any place-cards, Anne," said Connie in a puzzled voice. Up to now everyone's gaze had been riveted on the centrepiece, just as Anne had expected.

"What's this?" cried Daddy, who was the tallest person present, suddenly brushing his head against something and putting up his hand.

"Pull it down! Pull it down!" Anne cried joyously, and then everyone looked up to see lacy valentines floating in the air above their heads. Father and Miss Graham went around the table capturing them for shorter persons, and when they were pulled down they were found to be attached to a thread, and on the other end of each thread was a plump little balloon which had floated up to the ceiling and stayed there.

"Mine belongs to the 'Steamer-Chair Boy,'" said Mr. Sheldon, smiling across the table at Miss Graham.

"I'll exchange for it one marked 'Daddy' if you're sure just as much supper goes with the one you have," Jean Graham answered with pretended anxiety.

Anne, looking on, thought it the most delightful thing in the world to have this Fairy Godmother of

hers at their table, meeting Daddy and the others, liking Connie's party, saying bright, pleasant things to everyone. She had moments of feeling that it must be a dream, but if it were, she hoped not to wake for a long time. Suddenly she came back to reality again, for her glance fell on Rose, and she knew without being told that her sister was neither enjoying the party nor sharing in the general enthusiasm for Miss Graham.

"Who made these splendiferous cheese wafers?" Mr. Darling demanded when the salad course was served, and he had taken his first taste. "This is a corking dinner, Miss Connie. Why not have a birthday every month?"

"Anne made them," said Mrs. Parkes, who had been waiting for a chance to tell this. "And she cooked the meat and vegetables, and made the salad and part of the cake, and got the ice-cream ready for freezing."

Five persons around the table said "Anne" at almost the same instant. It was like a composite photograph of her name, and if Anne could have picked it apart she would have heard pride in Daddy's voicing of the name, joy in Jean Graham's, awestruck admiration in Mr. Darling's, and a certain lack of belief in the way Rose and Ellis said it. These two were not, in their own opinion, to be fooled. Of course old Anne had probably done a

lot, but with Mrs. Parkes standing over her every minute and telling her what to do, it wasn't really their sister who counted most.

Anne, herself, helped their delusion. "Oh," she cried, putting up her hands to cool her burning cheeks, "Mrs. Parkes was right there; she would have told me in a minute if I'd done anything wrong. And perhaps everything won't be good."

"Yes, but as a matter of fact I didn't have to tell you anything. For once in my life I kept my mouth shut, which is something John Parkes would never believe." Mrs. Parkes laughed, and cast a sidelong glance at Mr. Sheldon. "And, my dear, you needn't worry about everything not being good, because I've sampled it, and if there's anyone here who doesn't like anything it shows lack of judgment." After which challenge, Mrs. Parkes, feeling that she had got a great deal off her mind and done the proper thing by Anne, subsided into the background again.

Anne, who had expected to confide all this to Daddy after the others had gone to bed, was left somewhat dazed by this unexpected disclosure. She would have liked to jump up and help Esther Dookins, who was removing the salad plates, but instead she tried to look happy, and be a proper hostess.

"I drink to the health of Miss Anne." Mr.

Darling raised his glass of water and bowed gravely. Then he passed across the table to her his place-card, a red heart. " ' My heart shall ever beat for you,' " he quoted, " as long as you can cook like this."

Anne laughed and felt better. Then she met Jean Graham's gaze, which seemed to be saying, " It's your move to take all this gracefully." And, just as it had months before, the glance of the brown eyes challenged and fortified her.

Jokes flew about, and Mr. Darling and Daddy told funny stories. Connie looked and listened in perfect happiness. Occasionally she tasted the food that was before her, but more often her eyes roved admiringly from one to the other of her guests.

" Now the grown-ups are going to have their coffee in the living-room," she said, embracing them all in a shining glance as Anne rose from the table. " Hasn't my dinner-party been almost like the real thing? "

" It sure has," affirmed Mr. Darling. " I see one young person who seems to be knocked out by it." He nodded in the direction of Susan, whose curly head had dropped to one side. " May I—may I carry her upstairs for you? "

" I'll go up with her." Rose had been anything but her usual lively self during the supper, and now

she was glad to get away from them all. If this was Connie's idea of a good time it wasn't hers, she was thinking, as she preceded Mr. Darling upstairs, and turned on the light in the room where Susan slept.

Susan, who had dropped her head on Mr. Darling's shoulder and gone immediately into deeper slumber, did not open her eyes when he placed her gently on the bed.

"Probably you can undress her without waking her," he whispered.

"Perhaps," answered Rose, and Mr. Darling, going downstairs, decided that this daughter of Sheldon's was prettier, but not so pleasant and attractive as the others.

After they had chatted over the coffee-cups, Miss Graham was sadly but firmly sure that she must go. "It has been a lovely party," she said to Connie, "and I'm so glad I happened to come in time to be invited. I should love to stay longer, but my friends have invited some of their friends for this evening."

"I'll take you right over," Mr. Darling said hastily. "And, Miss Connie, I'm sorry to leave your nice party, but I've a long ride before me, and I think I'd better not come back after I leave Miss Graham."

"Anne and Ellis and I might ride over with you

and show you the way," suggested Mr. Sheldon. "Then at the turn of the road coming back, you can drop us, and we'll have a short walk to make us sleep."

Catching Anne alone for a moment before they went out to the car, Jean Graham put both hands on her shoulders. "Anne, you've done wonders; you're not the same girl I saw before," she said with enthusiasm. "How have you managed to accomplish so much?"

Anne looked up at her flushed and smiling. "You did it, I think," she answered simply. "You gave me such a big push that day that I haven't really stopped going since. And Daddy and Mrs. Parkes keep praising me, and I—well, I like praise."

"You deserve it. Anne, I can see the king-row just around the corner, can't you? As for me, I'm so proud to have you think I had anything to do with it that ——"

Someone came up at that moment, and the sentence was left unfinished, but Anne carried in her heart the memory of the lovely smile, the real tenderness of voice and manner.

Later on she sat in perfect contentment between her father and Miss Graham while Ellis on the front seat directed Mr. Darling's driving. And still later, after they had said good-by to Mr.

Darling, she walked home with father and Ellis, through the keen air, and was scarcely conscious of what they were saying. She knew that Daddy and the others liked Miss Graham, and that made her happy. And Daddy praised the party and her cooking. Even Ellis told her gruffly that it was a "crackerjack dinner."

It was not until they went to bed that Anne had it out with Rose, who had buried herself in a book after Mrs. Parkes went and hardly spoke except to say good-night.

"You didn't enjoy Connie's grown-up party, did you?" Anne asked, going into Rose's room after her sister was in bed.

"No," Rose turned her face away and mumbled something more of which Anne could only catch—"foolish" and "such a kid."

"Didn't you like my beloved Miss Graham?" Anne went on, knowing that she was tempting Fate.

"I can't see why you think she's so wonderful," Rose responded sullenly. "She isn't pretty, and she hasn't a bit of style. Ugh! I don't care for her."

"Daddy liked her the first minute," Anne said in a hurt voice.

"I know it. That's why—oh, don't talk to me. She makes me tired—and you make me tired, too,

Anne Sheldon. You just go on and on doing all the things you should. You'll be a perfect paragon next. And I hate 'em. *Do* go to bed."

Anne went. She was tired, she was puzzled and her feelings were hurt. Nevertheless there was a hovering smile which could not quite be banished, and as she turned out the light and snuggled into bed she was happy.

CHAPTER XIV

A PERNICKETY PRIG

"YOU'RE so fussy particular," Rose said, wiping a plate with two whisks of a towel, and waiting impatiently for Anne to put another into the drainer. It was the fourth day after Connie's party, and, to Rose, life had seemed one continuous round of dish-washing, notwithstanding the fact that she had evaded it whenever she could find a way out that seemed in the least reasonable. It was only because her class had been excused from school unexpectedly that she was helping about the lunch dishes to-day.

"I suppose I *am* fussy," Anne admitted, and was going on to say that it was harder on her than on anyone else, but thought better of it before the words escaped. "I hate sticky dishes, and if that girl comes to-morrow she must find everything clean."

"Well, thank goodness, Effie's brother is going to get well, and she'll be back in a month," Rose said with a heartfelt sigh, and quite as if the whole

burden of housekeeping were upon her shoulders. "Auntie Parkes says this girl doesn't know much, but you're getting to be such a dandy cook, Nan, that we shan't mind anything if she'll only do the dishwashing and scrubbing."

"That'll let you off, won't it?" Anne murmured, in spite of herself, and then hastened to change the subject so that she might keep Rose pleasant, at least until the dishes were done. "I suppose it's fine skating," she went on regretfully, as she caught a glimpse of girls and boys going by with skates. "I'd like to go; I'm getting so I just love it."

"Didn't I always tell you you'd like it if you'd ever stop being such a poke-in-the-house? I'm going the minute these bothering dishes are done. Why don't you come along?"

"Because, as I told you, I've got to clear up things for that girl." Anne's voice sounded impatient even to her own ears, but she did not care. "Everyone in the house has been wiping dishes since Effie went, and no one—except Connie—has tried to put a single dish back in its place. Look at that china-closet!"

Anne pointed with a dramatic fling of her arm across the room, and Rose's eyes followed the gesture. "Well, I'm sure I can't see anything very bad about that," she said with exasperating coolness. "You couldn't expect Daddy and Ellis to

know where to put 'em, and I just fitted 'em in where I could."

"I should have known that without being told," Anne answered, and then warned herself instantly that she must stop talking like this. She was tired and cross, and she knew she was making a wrong move every time she opened her mouth. She let her busy hands be idle for a moment, and looked out of the window at a gray-white cloud floating on deepest blue.

"I'll just tell you one thing, Anne Sheldon, and that is I wouldn't be the kind of housekeeper you're going to be for money." Rose put a plate down on the table with unnecessary emphasis and went on before Anne could say anything. "You'll be the kind that can't bear to see anything an inch out of place, and you'll think the world's coming to an end if you can't wash on Monday, iron on Tuesday, bake on Wednesday—er—er what-you-may-call-'em on Thursday, sweep on Friday and—and ——" The sound of the front door-bell saved her the necessity of making up some useful occupation for Saturday. "I'll answer it," she said, flying off without bothering to remove the striped apron which enveloped her. "It's probably the postman, though he usually rings twice."

Anne, alone in the kitchen, was fuming over her sister's last speech. Was she really so pernickety

as that, she wondered, or did Rose say it just to take her down a peg because she had been having so much praise lately? Rose had such a decided way of saying things that she almost made you believe them, Anne thought with a sigh, as she washed the last three dishes, put them in the drainer, and rinsed them with hot water. It was a comfort to think these really were the last, for, to-day, all the wearisome cooking dishes had been washed first.

She had just finished wiping the third plate, when she heard Rose coming back and someone with her. Edna, perhaps, or Roberta Brent, who, by this time, went wherever she pleased in the house. The next minute she realized that it wasn't a girl's voice, but before she could do more than wonder, Rose appeared, looking rather self-conscious and very mischievous, and behind her—Archie Bradley.

Anne's first thought was that Rose would expect her to be embarrassed by her apron, the kitchen, the dishes; and though she could feel her cheeks growing hot, she vowed that her sister's joke should not be a success if she could help it.

"Why, how do you do? Just wait till I wipe my hands and I'll welcome you properly," she said with a gay audacity which fell pleasantly on her own ears, and made Rose stare in amazement.

"There!" she went on, holding out her hand,

which had been vigorously scrubbed on her blue-checked apron. "Didn't I do that just like the real thing, and don't I look the part?"

The sunshine dropped flecks of gold on the red of her hair, and her eyes were very blue as she smiled at him.

"You look very nice," Archie Bradley answered in his direct way. Just a minute before he had been thinking Rose the prettiest one of the family, but now he wasn't sure. "I had to introduce myself to your sister; she's the only one of the family I hadn't met, you know. And she thought I'd better come out here and tell you what I wanted."

"I'm sure that was lovely of her," Anne said coolly. Then, with a sweeping glance around the room, "I think I could have chosen a better place, though."

"Oh, I like kitchens," answered Archie, and looked as though he meant it. The spectacles he was wearing to-day seemed a bit lighter than the ones he had worn the last time Anne saw him; or perhaps she was beginning to get back an idea of how he really looked.

"You're not so—so much disguised now, are you?" she said. "Are your eyes better?"

"Yes, a good deal. The doctor thinks I'll get along all right. I'll be thankful to get rid of these old glasses—they make me look villainous. But,

say, I came to ask you if you'd go to walk. You said you would some day."

"That's why I brought him out into the kitchen." Rose was anxious to get back into the conversation. "I knew if I gave her the message she'd say no."

Anne looked at them perplexedly. She wanted to go; there was no getting around that. She wished whimsically that Time would stop for the next hour or two, and permit her with a clear conscience to go out into the sparkling air with this boy who seemed so friendly and interesting.

"Well," Rose demanded sharply. "What are you going to say? Don't be a goose."

"I don't see how I can go," Anne said with her brightness a little dulled. "Look at this room—and Susan is out in the backyard playing in the snow; she keeps running in. Even if I could leave—all this—I couldn't shut up the house and go off without Susan."

"But your sister is here," protested Archie with a glance at Rose.

"Oh, I'm going out skating," Rose said, and had the grace to blush a little. "You could send Susan over to Mrs. Parkes," she added quickly.

"Then there'd be no one here when Connie and Jim get home. I'm awfully sorry ——"

"You could leave a note for the others," Rose persisted. "Oh, there are a dozen ways you could

manage if you only had some spunk, and weren't so pernickety about this old kitchen. I want her to wait and let the girl clean it to-morrow," she ended looking at Archie as if she expected him to sympathize with her point of view.

"Well, now listen," Anne said with a decision that made Archie turn at once from Rose to her. "Perhaps I am fussy-particular and pernickety, but this is the way it seems to me. I'd like to go awfully, but just now the house is my job and Susan's my job, and Jim is, too. And, if the kitchen pantry and china-closet aren't orderly when that girl comes how can I expect her to keep them so?" Anne was so much in earnest that she grew a little pale and squeezed her small hands tightly together.

"All right, have it your own way," Rose said lightly, impressed in spite of herself, but determined not to show it. "You'd better come skating with me, then, Mr.—er ——"

"You might just as well say Archie first as last; I'm going to be a family friend," that young gentleman announced politely.

"Why, of course. It would be lovely for you to go with Rose. She's a beautiful skater," Anne said with real eagerness. "I believe you could wear Ellis' skating boots." Though it gave her a sharp twinge of regret, Anne was quite sure that

this was the best way out of it. It would put Rose, now standing smiling and expectant, in the best of humors; Archie would have his fun, and she—well, anyway, she would get the kitchen off her mind, and she'd be keeping faith with Daddy.

"Thanks. I could get my own skates without any trouble," Archie was saying. "I don't believe I'll go to-day, though. I haven't been in such a nice homey kitchen for ages, and I'm going to stay with Anne. Let me take your apron, Rose, if you're going now, and I'll show how well I can 'buttle.'"

For an instant Rose stared in mute surprise. Then her hands went up to unbutton her apron. With this solution of the problem, staying at home seemed wholly desirable; she was honest enough to confess this to herself, but she wouldn't for worlds let the other two know she felt so. She couldn't understand why Archie should prefer a hot kitchen to a glorious expanse of ice with a good skater for a companion.

"Well, good-by," she said airily. "Have a good time. I suppose when I get home the kitchen will be so clean I shan't dare even to look at it." She was still lingering, still fumbling with the buttons of her apron, and she had no idea that the look she unconsciously gave her sister revealed what she desired, but wouldn't for anything say.

Anne, who in her quiet way had always studied faces, and wondered what persons were thinking, caught Rose's wish and responded instantly. "Why don't you stay, Rose? We'd get along a lot faster with three. And that would give me a chance to make some cake while you and Archie are doing the closet."

"Come on! Do stay! I bar all that's left in the mixing-bowl, and you can have the spoon, Rose," Archie said promptly.

"Will you really trust me to fix your precious closet?" Rose asked unbelievingly.

"Why, of course. You're much better about such things than I am—and you make things go faster."

"She's an accelerator, as it were," said Archie. "Come, lead me to my work, Miss Accelerator. I've been lazy for so long that I'm hungry for something to do."

Rose went to the drawer for a clean apron for Archie. "What's that you're calling me?" she demanded with suspicion. "I want to know whether to feel insulted or not."

"An accelerator is the part of an automobile that makes it go faster," Archie explained carelessly. "What Anne said made me think of it."

"Oh, really, is it?" Anne turned to him with an eagerness perfectly incomprehensible to the two

others, and then, at the surprise in their faces, she said more calmly, "Oh, yes, of course. I might have known from the name. I—I must tell Daddy."

Her delighted expression left Archie wondering what there could be about the mention of an automobile part that would make a girl look as if she'd had a present—or something of that kind. But then, girls were funny, anyway, and he didn't know much about them.

"Anne, the top shelf is perfectly in order, just as Effie left it, I guess," Rose announced. "It's only the others we've been monkeying with. May we have the whole table to set the dishes on?"

"Of course. I can go into the pantry to make my cake." Anne started to put some kitchen knives and forks into the table drawer, but stopped to straighten those already there.

"No, stay right here with us," urged Archie. "We'll make a nice little corner for you." Before Anne could protest, he took knives, forks and spoons from the neat drawer she was about to close. "There, look at this—a perfectly—good—fence. You can corral your cooking dishes here. And if either one of us trespasses you can fine him."

"You talk as if you'd been a cowboy," Anne said, recognizing the word corral as belonging to the west.

"I have—almost. Uncle began taking me out west when I was little, and I've done all sorts of things with him—slept out-of-doors—been lost—been hungry ——"

"Goodness! I supposed you didn't know what it is not to have a butler and—and servants, and a pocketful of money," Rose said bluntly, and then, because the boy looked at her in a queer way, wished she had kept still.

"My father died when my brother was a baby, and Uncle didn't begin to make money till about seven years ago," Archie said thoughtfully. "My mother had to work; and the worst of it was that she only lived four years after Uncle was able to make her comfortable."

"Where's your brother now?" Anne asked after an uncomfortable silence.

"Roger? Oh, he's in prep school, and he hates it," Archie answered, growing quite cheerful again. "He's kind of a spoiled kid. He used to stay home with mother while I went off with Uncle—and, of course, he was the baby—and mother couldn't help it, I suppose."

"How old is he?" Rose asked, poking into a corner of the closet to get out a cup which had been thrust out of sight. "Mercy! Someone's put away a cup that isn't clean."

"Susan, perhaps. Anyway, she's a good one to

blame, because we shan't tell her, and she isn't responsible." Anne was getting the eggs ready for her cake, and doing it in such a capable way that Archie stopped his work to watch her.

"Here, you belong to my party." Rose was holding out a pile of plates. "There, now I can wipe the shelves."

"Let me do that. I like to swab things. I'll take this wash-bowl, and you get some cloths."

"You didn't say how old your brother is," Rose announced when work was established on the new lines.

"Oh, Roger. Why, he's fourteen—no, fifteen. By jingo, I bet no one remembered his birthday. The poor kid! Uncle and I couldn't think of anyone but ourselves just at that time. Oh, the dickens! I must go home and dictate a letter to Pearson."

"Is that the man who bit his tongue when he got nervous?" Anne asked with a laugh.

Archie chuckled. "Was he the one you saw that day? No, he departed. He made us so nervous that Uncle said he should take to biting his own tongue before long. And then we got Pearson. I call him Pearson the Peach because I like him so much."

"I should think he'd write to Roger," Anne said unexpectedly. In the bottom of her mind she had

been worrying about this boy—away at school—hating it—not getting even a letter on his birthday—and so this remark popped out.

"Well, of course, he'd wait for Uncle or me to tell him, I suppose," Archie explained a little confusedly. He was scrubbing at one of the shelves until Rose wondered if he wouldn't take the paint off. "And Roger hasn't written much lately. He and Uncle don't seem to hit it off very well," he ended helplessly.

Then, because to leave it this way seemed to blame both uncle and brother, he tried again. "You see, Uncle can't understand why a boy of that age should hate to do all the out-of-door things other boys like, and should want to spend his time playing the violin and reading poetry. I half believe he even tries to write poetry sometimes." Archie said the last words under his breath, as if it were a secret he hated to divulge.

"I don't see why he can't understand. I mean your uncle. I should think he'd be the very one." Anne's mind had gone back in a flash to the thin-faced man who had seemed so shy and tender when he spoke of the little girl he had remembered for so many years. That was just *living* poetry, it seemed to her. Why shouldn't he sympathize with someone who wanted to write it?

"Uncle? Oh, I don't know. He doesn't care

for poetry and music. He thinks a boy ought to want to make money and to ride and to rough it."

"Is that the kind you are?" Rose asked, feeling very much in sympathy with Uncle's ideas.

"Oh, I guess so. I can ride and rough it, anyway. And I like books and study, too, when these fiendish eyes of mine will let me do it. Say, those shelves are as clean as I can make 'em."

"I should judge so. I've been wondering if there'd be enough left of 'em to set the dishes on," Rose said coolly. "Now we'll hustle things back."

"Just wait five minutes before you begin to hustle, and then my cake will be out," Anne implored, taking a peep into the oven.

"You can be mapping out the available space," Archie said to Rose. "Then I'll trot them over to the closet and put 'em just where you tell me. And, Anne, don't you let us see that cake until we've finished."

So, when Anne took the golden-brown cakes from the oven, she skilfully interposed herself between the pan and an audience which shamelessly peeked. Then she hurried it into the pantry. After this, hustling began, and in an incredibly short time the china-closet was the picture of neatness.

"You're a good little commanding officer," Archie said, to Rose's intense gratification. "She

just said 'here,' 'there,' 'now here,' and the thing was done."

"I told you she could," Anne agreed promptly, and both of them heard her murmur "accelerator" as she went to the pantry to get each of them a cake. Rose wondered what had got into old Anne, and why she should want to tell that to Daddy, who probably knew already what an accelerator is.

"Now, listen," commanded Anne, coming back with the cakes. "You may have these because you've been good, but if Susan comes in, and she may at any moment, don't you dare to let her see what you have."

"All right, your Majesty. Say, they look almost too good to eat," murmured Archie, gloating over his cake before tasting. It was a fatal delay, for Susan appeared in the doorway at that moment with Rex at her heels. Even in so short a time she and the collie had become friends and inseparable.

"I'm awful hungry. May Rexy and I——" Then she paused, silenced for the moment by the sight of the stranger in her kitchen.

Rose turned her back abruptly in order to swallow the bite she had taken, and at the same time slipped the remainder of her cake into an apron pocket. Archie sidled up to the table, and casually moved around some dishes left there, until he had a protecting wall behind which he laid his cake when

Susan looked the other way for an instant. He prided himself on having done it rather cleverly, as the child scarcely took her eyes from him.

"I'll give you two nice ginger-cookies," said Anne, "and Rex may have his dinner now if you'll take the plate out in the yard for him."

"You can—or Wose. I'd rather stay in here. Who's that lady with a napun and spetaculls? Is she going to do the work 'stead of Effie?"

"Not on your life," said Archie with a laugh. "Don't you remember seeing the boat when it slid off into the water? That's where you saw me."

"There wasn' tenny lady with a napun on there," Susan responded, shaking her head. Her voice was sweet and a little sad, as if she hated to accuse a stranger of not telling the truth.

Archie obligingly took off the apron. "There, do you know me any better now?"

"Ye-es; anyway, I know you ain't a lady," Susan admitted. "Look! Rex likes him!" she cried delightedly, as her new chum, after sniffing politely, laid his soft head against Archie in token of friendship.

"Of course. All dogs like me, and I like all dogs. Now will you shake hands and be friends?" He took a step toward Susan and held out his hand, and, while she hesitated, Rex, who had continued his sniffing explorations, followed his nose to the

extent of putting his forepaws on the table. Not being noticed, he poked his beautiful head over the barricade Archie had erected—there was another sniff—a snap of his strong jaws—and then Rex was on the floor again, looking up at them with kind, mournful eyes.

"He must have caught a fly," Susan said gleefully.

"Winter flies are such good eating," Archie murmured with an anguished glance at Anne.

"Anyway, he made it fly, didn't he?" said Rose. "You take your cookies, Susan, and I'll get my coat, and we'll carry out some bones for Rex. Then we'll start a snow-man, and you and Jimsey can finish it when he gets here." She was conscious that she was sacrificing herself, and she cherished the hope that Anne and Archie would notice it. Of course, one couldn't mention such a thing about herself. Rose's code of honor was peculiar in some ways, but she carried it out unflinchingly.

"Come on now. Here, Rex!" Rose swept the half-unwilling Susan out of the house with her without touching her or saying more than that.

"I don't see how she does it," Anne said wistfully. "I should have had to talk and explain and coax until Susan and I were both tired, and then she wouldn't have been satisfied."

"Rose is like a good strong breeze. You just

have to go her way when she makes up her mind to it," chuckled Archie. "Oh, yes, thank you; I will take a cake. They look very nice. Did you make them yourself?" And then they both laughed as if this were the most delicious wit in the world.

Archie ate his cake, and having been over-persuaded by his hostess, consented to try another. Then Ellis appeared, and he made a fire in the playroom, and the two boys went in there and talked baseball, while Anne slipped into a dress not meant exclusively for the kitchen. By this time Jimsey had come, and having been fortified with cookies, was perfectly willing to go on with the building of the snow-man. This released Rose, who ran upstairs, and rather shamefacedly produced a box of marshmallows which she had not intended to share with her family to any extent.

"We'll toast 'em," she said, flying into Anne's room where that young person was just giving a last pat to her hair. "It will be quite partyish. Suppose I 'phone Bobby to come over. She doesn't seem to have much fun."

"All right, do," responded Anne, pleased at the suggestion. "Connie's going home with Louise," she went on. "I wish she were here to see Archie."

As Rose had said, it was quite partyish to toast marshmallows. Presently Miss Bobby slipped in with her little gliding step, coming through the

same doorway where she had first appeared to them. She refused a chair and dropped down on a cushion before the fire, and before long she was making them all laugh by her amusing description of something that had happened to her.

When the clock struck five Archie looked at the others in genuine surprise. "Don't tell me that clock's right," he protested. "I've been around with grown-ups so long that time flies like lightning when I get with young people. I wish I could ask you all over to our house, but Uncle can't stand anything yet."

"You must come here often and stay as long as you like. And I promise you that we won't always entertain you in the kitchen," Anne said hospitably, and then, a sudden thought striking her, "When Roger comes home for his spring vacation you must bring him, too."

"Thank you. I'm afraid Uncle means to have him stay there with a tutor." Archie looked as if he didn't feel quite comfortable about his brother. "Anyway, I shall be awfully glad to bring him if he does come."

"I'll go across the street with Roberta and then I'll walk along with you and meet Dad," said Ellis, and was immediately much embarrassed. "Of—of course, I mean, if you're going, Roberta."

"I'm not. I'm going to stay and help Susan

and Jimsey eat supper. It's the most entertaining thing I know of."

"If you are, I'll walk along, too, and meet Daddy." Rose felt truly grateful. She had wanted to propose going, but it seemed sneaky to leave Anne to look out for the children and get dinner. She pranced a little in her eagerness, and Miss Bobby's dark eyes followed her wistfully.

At the door Ellis caught her and pulled her into the hall. "Cut out that dancing while she's here." He indicated Roberta with a jerk of the elbow. "You don't want to rub it in that she can't do those things."

"Listen, Mr. Smarty," Rose answered in a quick whisper, "the doctor says she could do a lot more if she only would. But she thinks it's too much trouble."

"Well," growled Ellis—and then again—"well ——"

"I quite agree with you," flashed his sister with a laugh, and slipped out of his grasp to put on her coat and hat. If she could help it she did not want to look at Anne, for, after all, Roberta wouldn't be any real help, and if Anne looked tired—Rose disappeared in the hall-closet, and managed to occupy several minutes in hunting for her rubbers.

In the meantime Anne was assuring Archie that he hadn't stayed a moment too long, and that he

must come soon again, and that her father had said he should call on Mr. Bradley as soon as that gentleman was able to see him.

"We'll have that walk or go skating soon, won't we?" Archie asked, and then added, "I've had a corking time, and I'm going to tell Uncle what you said about staying on your job. He'll like that—and I do, too."

"If you knew my father you wouldn't say that was doing much," Anne protested. Nevertheless, she was glad that he hadn't thought her a "pernickety prig," as Rose sometimes called her.

"Come on, Rose, if you're coming," Ellis called as the two boys waited for a moment just outside the door.

"I'm not," Rose said, emerging from the hall-closet, coatless and hatless. "I've decided not to go. Good-by, Archie. Come again soon."

Anne sighed a little as the door closed. "I've had a good time, but I'm so tired. I'm awfully glad you didn't go, Rose."

Rose gave her a quick glance. "Anne Sheldon, you go and rest on the living-room couch for awhile. I'll give the kids their supper, and I won't call you for half an hour at least. Come on out, Bobby Brent, and call Susan in. She'll come for you."

Two minutes later Rose dashed back into the living-room alone, and dropped on her knees beside

the couch. "Anne, it was a sneaky trick to bring that boy right out into the kitchen, and I ought to have had one good slap. But you were a little brick. And you're not fussy-particular—nor a pernickety prig—nor—nor any of the mean things I've called you. So there!" There was a pat, a remorseful squeeze of the hand, and she was gone.

It was a complete surrender; for the time being at least. Anne could never remember hearing Rose speak in this way before As she lay there, strangely happy, the soft shadows of the darkening room crept soothingly about her, and presently she forgot everything.

CHAPTER XV

SPRING MAGIC

CONNIE got up very quietly from her bed and tiptoed over to the open window, casting a backward glance at Susan, who was sleeping soundly.

This was a wonderful morning, though nobody in the family, except Jimsey, believed in the marvel of it as Connie did. Four weeks ago she had been looking in an almanac, which had somehow drifted into the house, and one awakening fact had caught her eye and remained printed on her memory. "March 21st—spring begins"—was what she had read, and for her the rest of the book was as nothing.

How would spring begin, she wondered. Would there be flowers popping up their heads and would the birds know? When she mentioned the idea to others of the family the result was far from satisfying.

"'Sprig, gedtle Sprig,'" Ellis had said, trying to be funny. "We're just as likely to have a blizzard on that day."

"Con thinks someone presses a button, and whoopee! all the leaves and flowers come out," was Rose's remark.

Connie had kept a dignified silence. She was twelve years old and of course she couldn't think anything so foolish. She wished she had waited until Anne and Daddy were in the room before she said anything about it. Anne never laughed at people's ideas, and Daddy somehow made them bigger. She was just resolving to keep this one to herself and see how it turned out when she felt Jimsey's hand giving hers a sudden grip. "Let's watch for it," he whispered. "Let's see what happens."

So since that day the two of them had watched with never a word to anyone else, and they had found signs aplenty, or so it seemed to them. When the ice broke up, and there was no more skating; when the snow melted, and the gutters on the hill-streets became rushing rivers; when the early March winds were rough playmates for the clouds; most of all, when Daddy sat at the table evenings surrounded by flower and seed catalogues, Connie and Jim felt that something wonderful was in the air, and they must be on the alert to see it.

So this morning, this twenty-first of March, after one satisfying peep out of the window, Connie slipped on her wrapper and made her way quietly

toward the room where Ellis and Jim slept. It was all a part of the magic of the morning that Jimsey, himself, met her just outside the door of his room, for it would have been hard to wake him without disturbing Ellis, and Connie would have hated to have the beginning of spring troubled by an unpleasant word.

"Get your bathrobe and slippers," directed Connie, who always exercised a motherly care over her younger brother and sister. Jim slid back into his room, and came out again with shining, expectant eyes.

At Connie's window they both went down on their knees so that their faces would be at a proper level. Jim's came just conveniently above the sill; Connie's, a good deal higher.

"Yesterday it was still winter," Connie said in a low, mysterious voice, though she might have talked loud without waking that curled-up ball of a Susan. "Yesterday was winter," she repeated, as if to make the wonder of it greater, "and now—to-day—just listen—and sniff—and look."

Jim listened and thought he heard—something—he didn't know what—he was sure that it was more than the morning chatter of the sparrows into which it disappointingly resolved itself, but, as he couldn't explain, he wisely didn't try.

"Uh-huh, I hear it—something, I mean," he

murmured, nodding his head knowingly. "What is it?"

"It's the 'Voice of Spring,'" affirmed his sister solemnly. She had heard someone sing a song about the voice of spring, and the idea had lingered pleasantly in her mind. "It's made of rustling leaves, and cunning breezes, and—and clear water running over—over colored pebbles." Connie was unconsciously weaving a spell that was to hold her younger brother all his life. Neither of them guessed that Jimsey would never again feel the first thrill of spring without thinking of Connie and wishing to be with her.

Jim sniffed the air with rapture. "It's warm—different from yesterday," he ventured; "there's something—something sweet—coming up from—from the earth."

Connie nodded, her brown eyes full of solemn joy. "That's the way spring *would* smell. Think of all the flowers that are coming later."

"I know," assented Jim breathlessly, and a moment later, "I wish we could move some of those houses and trees."

They looked between bare branches at a small bit of eastern sky streaked gray and crimson. As they watched, the color grew into flame, sparrows stopped twittering, there was a hush over everything. Suddenly a dancing breeze puffed in their

very faces, and a robin flew into a tree not far from the window, cocked his head in their direction and began to sing.

"The sun's up," said Connie, quite as if she had been told. "Let's get dressed and go out and see if it's a big red one. And then I can get some dusting done for Anne before breakfast." Which was so like Connie, who one minute was ablaze with fancy, and the next could talk of dish-towels if necessary.

"Believe me," she added, coming back to her mood of mystery as Jimsey was starting for his room, "believe me, something's going to happen to-day. I can feel it in every one of my bones. It's a day—a day when something has to happen."

"To you or to me?" questioned Jim, looking at her with fascinated gaze.

"I don't know—it could be either of us—or perhaps someone else in the family. You'll see."

"All right. If you know it and I don't, you'll tell me, won't you?" Jim said with perfect trust, and departed with the hope that this day would be unlike all the previous ones of his short life.

Anne, opening sleepy eyes a few minutes later, woke with a curious feeling of light-heartedness. "Why, it seems almost like summer," she said to herself, and just then Connie paused outside her

door, and Anne heard her singing softly to a melody of her own:

"Spring begins! Magic day!
Things will happen!
Spring begins!"

"Why, so it is the real beginning of spring," thought Anne, and remembered that Rose and Ellis had laughed over Connie's expectations of spring-like weather. "I'm glad it has happened just as she wanted it."

After she was dressed she stood by the open window. Beneath her, Rex, who had just been let out of the cellar, was indulging in a series of fantastic capers which made her laugh. "Oh, Rex," she called softly, and the dog, looking up, said in one sharp bark, "Come on out and play."

"Nice old Rex," Anne responded. "You look as if you were trying to tell me something. Go get Connie to throw a stick for you. She's beginning spring."

As she said the last words Anne felt an exultant thrill. Winter was really over—the winter to which she had looked forward five months ago with the despairing feeling that it would last forever. And she could truthfully say that she had partially got rid of the old Anne whose head and eyes had ached, who was shy and thin and didn't want to meet people, and who thought housework and out-

door exercise almost equal afflictions. Then, too, she had four new friends—Jean Graham, Archie, Mr. Darling, Miss Bobby—that was quite a record for five months. Best of all was the ever-increasing comradeship with Daddy. Why, only yesterday, he had introduced her to someone as his "right-hand man." All this flashed through Anne's mind so swiftly that when she looked down Rex was still gazing up at her invitingly.

"Run away, you tempting dog," she said firmly. "I'd honestly like to run with you, but I've got to help start the family machine." Then she went down to find Connie and Jim just coming in after their little journey in search of the sun. Connie got a duster, and helped Anne to put the living-room in order, and she kept through it all an air of mystery, and a sense of something about to happen.

"Still good news from your brother, Effie?" Mr. Sheldon asked as he sat down at the breakfast-table. "We're mighty glad to have you with us again, aren't we, children?"

Effie, who had returned a week ago, beamed at the joyful murmur of assent. "Yes, sir. He's all right. He's back at work," she answered primly, but deep in her heart she was thinking that this family belonged to her almost as much as her own. And the children were all good children, even though they might have their little ways.

"That's fine. It was your good nursing put him on his feet, I'm sure. What's the program for to-day, Nan? I hope now that Effie's here you'll do something entertaining every day. You've worked splendidly."

Anne's eyes were shining as she answered. "This afternoon Archie and Mr. Pearson are going off in the automobile on some business for Mr. Bradley, and Archie has invited Rose and me to go."

"And, Daddy, won't you please take out that kind little fountain pen of yours and write a note for me to be excused a half-hour earlier," pleaded Rose, jumping up to get a sheet of paper for her father.

"Oh, Rose, I hate to interfere with your school," Daddy answered, frowning a little; "won't it be time ——"

"Archie wants to start early," Rose interrupted, "because they've got to get home in time for his lessons. I can't keep them waiting, Daddy, and it's such a glorious day to be out-of-doors."

Anne saw her father look toward the back yard, and knew that he would like to be out there digging, and planning the garden, instead of in an office. It was her most cherished wish that some day—in some way—it might be managed.

"That's so." Daddy came back to the present

after a long meditative stare at the possibilities of his garden. "Schools and offices ought to be abolished by law on a day like this." He was fumbling in his pocket for the fountain pen as he ended.

"Spring begins," chanted Connie, cocking her head, and suggesting so strongly the robin who had sung to them at sunrise that Jimsey chuckled, and then coughed for fear someone would ask him what he was laughing at. This was his secret—his and Connie's.

"Choking, son? Don't eat quite so fast," warned Daddy kindly, and Jimsey chuckled again. He wondered if his father knew about the Voice of Spring, all made up of rustling leaves and whispering breezes and little brooks running over colored stones. Sometime he would ask him if he had ever heard it.

"Please—more," Susan said, extending her cereal dish. "Lots of sugar." Susan was absolutely unthrilled by the beginning of spring. She had not even taken the trouble to wonder what Connie meant when she talked about it.

"Well, anyway, probably we'll get some more snow before summer." Ellis was decided in his manner, and had quite the air of having received special information in regard to the weather.

"Oh, not really snow." Connie's protest came from the heart.

"My Aunt Serena used to say that March snow was good for the sap, and snow in April was good for the ground," Daddy observed, recalling some of the almost forgotten teaching of his boyhood.

"You haven't heard from Aunt Serena for a long, long time, have you?" Anne said thoughtfully. "I can remember being taken to see her when Ellis and I were small—and she lived in a funny little house."

"Do you remember the pet hen named Kataw-kut?" Ellis chuckled. "That name took my fancy. If I ever own a hen I shall name it that."

Mr. Sheldon pushed back his chair. "Those were great days," he said with a sigh. "Anne, I ought to write Aunt Serena—I'm afraid I've owed her a letter for a long time—and I'm so busy in the daytime and so tired at night. Couldn't you ——"

"Couldn't I write to her, do you mean? Of course. I'll do it this morning. I feel just like putting words on paper." Anne, always in a hurry to help Daddy when he was so apologetic about asking, sat smiling at him across the table, without the least suspicion that in promising to write this letter she was putting her hand actively on the steering-wheel of the family car.

"Well, good-by, children. Be good and ——" Further remarks from Daddy—who was always trying to remember to be a wise chauffeur for the

Sheldon Six—were buried under an avalanche of hugs and kisses. "Bless me, I shall lose my car," he said, as he twisted eel-like from their embraces. Then he plunged into his overcoat and out of the house with one and the same motion.

"Some day you will make him lose his car," Ellis said disapprovingly, after forcibly removing Susan, who had clung to her father's coat. He lingered a moment in the doorway with Anne and Rose while the three younger children started a game with Rex.

"Jingo! I think father's just right about saying schools should be closed on a day like this," Ellis murmured. "I'd give a farm to start on a hike this morning."

"Well, you haven't got a farm, and, anyway, Daddy didn't mean that," Rose said promptly. "You know he wants us to get all the education we can."

"Smart child. How long since you've had a change of heart?" demanded her brother. "Methinks I heard you complaining about having to go to school not so many weeks ago."

"Methinks very likely you did. But by some wonderful chance little Rose is going to get through this term without having to take any exams, and it makes her feel like a good child about school."

"Good for you, Rosy. That's fine, and Daddy'll

be so pleased." Anne looked at her sister approvingly. "Why didn't you tell him this morning?"

"Too many others talking. I never get any chance at Daddy when the family's around. Anyway, good news'll keep." Rose turned back into the house and went upstairs.

"My goodness! It makes me want to be in school to hear anyone talk about it," Anne sighed, and the next instant forgot her own desires because her brother looked at her so queerly.

"Isn't that just the plague of it?" he said gloomily. "You want to be there and you can't. I don't want to, but I can and—and I have to. Anyway, Nan"—he looked around to be sure that no one else was hearing—"I don't believe I'm going to get through this year—even skin through the way I have before."

"Oh, you'll get through," Anne responded with a confidence that was perfectly sincere. To her it seemed incredible that anyone in the family should fail in this way. "What makes you think so this year?"

"Well"—Ellis hesitated, and turned his face away—"Mr. Jackson had a very plain talk with us the other day. He—he said some of us are sure not to get diplomas. He didn't mention any names, but he didn't need to so far as I'm concerned."

"Perhaps he didn't mean you," Anne ventured

after a pause, though there was something in her brother's manner that carried conviction. "Didn't he say that if you all braced up now and worked—worked like everything—there might be a chance?"

"Yes, he did. Of course he was trying to scare us into doing just that," Ellis admitted. "But—hang it all—I've just slid, and been poked and pushed through the other classes. And now I'm on mighty thin ice—and—and I can't find a solid place to put my foot on.

"I won't go back another year," he continued after a pause in which Anne could think of nothing to say. "I'll be eighteen in June—and father'll surely let me go to work. Anyway, he wouldn't be cruel enough to make me put in another whole year just for the sake of a piece of paper."

"A diploma isn't just a piece of paper and nothing more." It was always hard for Anne to be patient when Ellis and Rose talked about school. "And if you're going to work I should think any—any employer would want to know that after you've been four years in a school you were worth, at least, a piece of paper."

"You needn't rub it in. You're so all-fired smart about books yourself that you think everyone else ought to be. Anyway, I don't believe employers ever ask whether you have a diploma or

not." Ellis' manner was surly, but there was no conviction in his tone when he voiced this last idea.

By this time Anne was regretting her speedy judgment. Not that it did not still seem true, but because it was evidently not the right way to go to work with Ellis. "Wrong move! I'm up in the corner again," she thought forlornly. It occurred to her that she had found out that a great deal can be learned outside of books, and perhaps that was the way Ellis would have to learn, too. She wondered what she could say, and several ideas flew into her mind, only to be rejected.

"Why don't you talk with Mr. Jackson?" she said at last with a feeling of relief because it was such a simple way out. "He'll tell you whether you have any chance and what you ought to do. Or—or ask Daddy to help you about your lessons."

"Father's too tired at night to do anything but stew over his old garden books," Ellis said with a decision that impressed her. "Anyway, I'm not going to make him more tired by telling him that I'm no good."

"Oh, Ellis, you are. But I feel just the way you do about telling father. Mr. Jackson's the one. And—and I'm sorry I said what I did about the diploma. Probably it doesn't make any differ-

ence about getting a position. Lots of boys go to work who haven't diplomas."

"Yes, but usually they haven't had a chance to try for one for four years," Ellis conceded unexpectedly. "You needn't go back on what you said. I daresay it's true. But, I'll tell you one thing; I shouldn't have talked with you about it at all if you hadn't shown so much grit about housework and cooking when I knew you hated the thought of anything but books." With which electrifying remark Ellis made one of his usual bursts of speech to the hall closet and back, turning up rugs, and catching his foot in a chair, and was off for school. "I'll think about your advice," he called back after he reached the sidewalk.

"Goodness me! I must hurry the children off," Anne murmured, feeling happy and perplexed and worried all in the same minute. But the worriment gave place to relief, for Connie came downstairs just then with a clean, though sulky, Susan and a smiling Jimsey in her train.

"We're all ready," Connie said, noticing her sister's glance at the clock. "That clock's a little fast, anyway."

"Jim, your eyes shine as though you knew something the rest of us don't know," Anne said, giving him a big hug.

"P'r'aps I do," answered Jimsey as well as he

could for being half-smothered. He was quite sure, however, that he did not know more than Connie.

"Last tag," said Rose, who had come downstairs quite quietly for her, and had tapped Susan on the shoulder in passing. Whether it was chance, or whether she realized that Susan was sulkily unwilling to go to school no one knew. Anyway, the touch and the magic words were sufficient, and Susan raced after her as fast as she could go.

"Now for the rooms, and then my letter to Aunt Serena," Anne said to herself as she hurried upstairs. Often this departure for school left her with a longing to go also, but this morning, in spite of being sorry for Ellis, she loved life and was happy.

Something of her mood bubbled over into the letter she wrote to Aunt Serena. She told her what a joyous sort of day it was, and how Connie felt about it, and that Rose was growing prettier, and Jimsey was a dear, and Ellis almost as tall as father. Then she remembered a few of Susan's sayings and put those in. There was a little woven in about what she had been doing since October, and that she was so well now that the doctor was sure she could go back to school after the summer vacation. Then she added all the news she could think of about Aunt Lucia. And at last she wrote:

"Aunt Serena, I can remember going to see you when I was a small girl, and that I loved your house, and the garden where the currant and gooseberry bushes were. Ellis remembers best the chickens, and the hen you named Kawtawkut. Now, Auntie, we think you ought to come and return our call, only you've waited such a long time you'll have to pay it back with interest and make it a visit. Please come and see what a nice family of grandnieces and grandnephews we are."

Anne read over her letter with some anxiety. "It's almost as long as a small book," she thought. "I hope she feels as interested in us as we do in her." Then she hunted up some recent snapshots of the children and labeled them. The only good one of herself had been snapped when she did not know it, and it showed her in a kitchen apron, holding a loaf of cake just taken from the oven.

"I'll run out and mail it, and then I'll look for those window-screens Daddy wants to paint," she decided. Somehow even writing this letter made her happier and filled her heart with the hope that sometime she should write what others would want to read. In the last few months she had been so absorbed in other things that she had fancied even the desire to write was gone, but this morning—this magical spring morning, made everything seem different.

She went out into the little stable which served as a general storage place, and, after a short search, found the screens leaning against a heap of old carpeting. Before she went back to the house she stopped to speak to the rabbits Jim had recently acquired.

"If this weather keeps on, your box can be put out-of-doors," she informed them. "I wonder if you feel dreadfully shut in to-day."

The mother rabbit looked out through the wire grating and twitched her pink nose invitingly. She hoped that this giant looking in at her family had brought something for them to eat.

"Oh, dear, I haven't got a thing," Anne answered. "Jimsey'll feed you when he gets home. I'd like to let you out, but I shan't." This morning it seemed to her she could understand just how all imprisoned things must feel, and she had a wild desire to make everyone free.

"What a goose I am. As if I could do that," she said, shaking herself out of a reverie. "I'd much better go in and set the table for Effie." But even this return to practical work could not disturb her lightness of spirit which failed her only when she thought of Ellis.

That afternoon, when they were returning from their automobile ride, Archie took Rose on the front seat with him so that he might give her a lesson in

driving the machine. Anne did not want to learn, but Rose had proved an apt pupil, and even in a lesson or two had made great progress.

On the back seat, Mr. Pearson, moved by the beauty of the day, gave Anne a detailed account of a spring walking-tour he had once taken in England. Anne was interested, but, as usual, there was something about the swift rush of the machine, the air fluttering against her face, which set her thoughts flying. So, as Mr. Pearson's pleasant voice went on and on, between pictures of flower-sweet English villages, she sandwiched thoughts of the family—largely of Ellis. She wished he could have a tutor like this one to find out where he really stood and start him in the right direction. Perhaps the school principal would recommend someone. She wondered if Daddy would feel he could afford to pay for having Ellis tutored.

Suddenly she realized that there had been a pause in Mr. Pearson's description, and that now he had returned to America and was talking about Archie.

"Arch hates to get back for lessons," he said with a chuckle. "I can always tell when we're getting home by the way he slows up the car. Four to six isn't a good time for lessons, anyway, but those seem to be the hours Mr. Bradley can best spare me.

"Archie's working all right," he went on, as if he

were afraid of giving a wrong impression of his pupil, with whom he was on the best of terms. "Only it is hard on him to be shut in for lessons just when other young people are getting out. I really wish there were some other fellow to share the lesson-hour with him."

Anne, startled out of her self-absorption, looked up at him with a queer wistful expression. She wished she dared speak to him about Ellis and wondered how her brother would take it if she did. She decided that she'd better not interfere, and longed to be Rose, because then she should come straight to the point without stopping to think.

"Well, Miss Anne, what is it you'd like to say? Did anyone ever remark that you have a telltale face?" Mr. Pearson was making fun of her gently, but Anne did not mind.

"Oh, I don't know that I ought, but if you'll please not tell that I did, and—and if you really mean what you've just been saying, would you mind asking my brother Ellis to come in sometimes for the lesson hour?" And then, feeling that she had done a dreadful thing to say as much as this, Anne rallied her sinking courage, and went on to explain the situation as best she could.

"He—he'd be miserable if he knew I told," she ended, "but when you spoke in that way it seemed such a chance." She was twisting her hands as she

so often did, and looking up at him with anxious eyes.

Mr. Pearson had a smile which changed him all at once from a rather plain young man into a friendly person whom one instinctively liked and trusted. So, now, Anne's hands relaxed immediately, and she drew a deep breath of relief. Whichever way he decided would be all right, she felt, and she was sure that he did not think it dreadful of her to have asked.

"I believe that can be managed if your brother will agree," he began in a low tone. "Suppose I tell Archie only that Ellis needs a little help, and that he might suggest to him to bring his books over between four and six." He shook his head, a little puzzled. "It sounds clumsy when I try to put it into words, but give me time to think it over. Archie and I are good chums; we can plan almost anything. And whatever it is, I promise you we won't hurt Ellis' feelings, nor let him know you've said anything about it."

"Oh, thank you so much. You've taken an awful weight off my mind." Anne was perilously near to tears of gratitude, but she repressed them sternly.

"It's a spring conspiracy—mum's the word," said Peter Pearson, holding out his hand.

Anne shook hands, feeling that if this went

through all right nothing better could be asked, for Archie had faithfully sung the praises of his tutor, who, according to him, could make anyone learn.

"Oh, dear, we're home," Rose said, jumping out of the automobile almost before it had stopped, "and I'm sorry. I'd like to go on for hours and hours, and I think learning to drive is the most interesting thing I ever did."

"You can just bet I'd like to go on and on, but this old fellow is going to shut me up and try to pound things into my head." Archie shook his fist at Mr. Pearson, who only smiled and got into the car again after helping Anne. "Oh, I say," Archie went on, "there's Ellis coming with a load of books. Let's capture him and make him do his studying while I do mine. Do you mind, Mr. Pearson? I'd like it lots better if someone else was in captivity."

"Go ahead. I'd like it, too," Peter Pearson responded coolly, and before Archie could start the car he said to Anne, "Wonderful day, isn't it, Miss Anne? Real spring magic in the air." And then, with his pleasant smile, "It's a day when things happen, you know."

CHAPTER XVI

THE BOY WHO WAS STUB-FIRM

ANNE almost ran into the house as the automobile started off. She could not bear to wait, for fear Ellis might not accept this wonderful invitation which seemed to promise so much. Safe in her own room, she was listening anxiously, dreading to hear him come in, when Rose went by the door and called out, "El got into the car without waiting for a second bid. I never expected to see him jump at the chance to study."

"I'm glad," Anne answered, repressing her delight, because she did not want Rose to guess that she knew anything about it. "Archie hates having lessons at this time, but I suppose his uncle keeps Mr. Pearson pretty busy the rest of the day."

"He must be a cross, selfish old thing—the uncle I mean—not Mr. Pearson." Rose lingered by the door an instant, then started on irresolutely. "Oh, dear, I've got lessons that'll take me from now till dinner-time. I almost wish I hadn't happened to make such a good start this month. It's so hard to live up to myself."

Anne smiled over Rose's last remark, and was inexpressibly happy because Ellis had accepted the help which had come to him so promptly. She felt sure that once started Mr. Pearson would know how to manage the rest.

On her desk lay a half-written letter to Aunt Lucia which must be finished to-day in order to reach its destination this week. "Nothing to keep me from doing it right now," she said to herself with some sternness, realizing that she did not in the least want to write letters, and would much prefer to run across the street and call on Roberta. She wondered if she ought to look up the children, but she could see Susan jumping rope on the sidewalk with her best friend, and Connie and Jim were always to be trusted.

"They're probably chasing the spring," Anne thought, and decided that it was this first wonderful spring day which was making it so hard for her to settle down.

As she reached for her pen her hand struck a large key which did not belong on her desk. "Goodness! That's the key to the stable. I forgot to hang it behind the kitchen door—and I'm always scolding Jimsey for not putting it back."

It occurred to her that she ought to go down and put it in place immediately, but she knew that if she did she should find some excuse for going out-

of-doors, and her letter would not be finished. "If anyone wants it I'm sure to be asked where it is," she told herself, and tried to put her whole mind on writing Aunt Lucia all the family happenings.

Something over an hour later she sealed and stamped a lengthy letter, and felt herself an extremely worthy person as she started downstairs to take it out to the box. She stopped in the kitchen on her way to restore the key to its nail behind the door. "I'm bad this time," she said, smiling at Effie. "I took it upstairs with me this morning."

"You must have left the door unlocked, I guess. I dunno what Connie and Jim are up to—I saw Connie slyin' in there a while ago with a glass of milk and somethin' on a plate. An' a little later Jimsey come stealin' into the house and went back again with a cushion. Bein' as it's those two I s'pose it's all right, but you might just look and see." This was such a long speech for Effie that she ended with an audible sigh.

"All right. I'll just put my letter in the box and then go and 'fess up that I left the door unlocked. Jimsey'll say that's one on me."

Coming back, Anne halted just outside the stable door. If Connie and Jim were having spring secrets she did not want to break in upon them without warning. "Oh, Con," she called softly, and then again, "oh, Connie."

Immediately she heard footsteps, and the next minute Connie was standing in front of her, even pushing her gently away from the door. "Please, don't come," she begged with so much earnestness that Anne involuntarily fell back a step or two. "The minute I heard your voice I said, 'That's my sister Anne, and she won't come in if I ask her not to.'"

"Why, who's there beside Jimsey? Anyone who would be afraid of me?" Anne questioned, and was amazed to see her sister look really distressed.

"I didn't say anyone else was there, did I?" asked Connie, flushing and turning her honest eyes away from Anne's gaze. "Jimsey and I have been together all the time to-day except when we were in school. This is the beginning of spring and I said—I said things would happen."

"But why do you mind if I know who's there with you?" Anne persisted. She had never known the open-hearted Connie to look and act like this before. Unconsciously she took a step forward, only to find her sister posed as a barrier between her and the stable door.

"Please, please don't," she pleaded. "I want to tell you dreadfully, but I can't, 'cause I promised."

Anne was frankly puzzled. As Effie had said, being Connie and Jim, she could not suspect that

there was anything really wrong. To her great relief the back door opened, and father appeared, and at the same instant Jimsey sauntered out of the barn and took his place beside Connie.

"Come on, children, let's walk around the yard and see where we're going to plant things," Daddy called cheerfully, and though Anne was really listening to him, she heard Jimsey say under his breath to Connie, "Let's go; that'll give him a chance to get away."

With all her heart Anne hated to break up the plans of other persons, or to extract from them information they did not want to give her. It occurred to her that she had only to mention screens to her father, and it would be the most natural thing in the world for him to go in the stable and take a look at them. But when she saw Connie's anxious face she couldn't even do that.

Fortunately for her, Daddy solved the problem in a much simpler way. "Before we start around the garden, son, run in and get the key and lock the stable door. We may forget it when we're called to dinner and I don't like the idea that anyone could spend the night in here."

Jimsey took two steps, then halted and looked at Connie, who, to the amazement of everyone, burst into tears.

"D-Daddy, darling, won't you please let it stay

unlocked just this one evening?" she implored. "I'll—I'll come out and lock it before I go to bed, and—and nobody will—will sleep there all night."

Then, at sight of her father's astonished face, she went on wildly. "There—there is someone in the stable—I'm breaking my word when I say so—and he was hungry, and he can hardly keep his eyes open, b-because he hasn't slept for two whole nights and ——" she stifled her sobs against her father's coat as his arms went around her. "I—I promised him I w-wouldn't tell," she ended with real grief.

"Never mind. You couldn't help it," a boy's voice said wearily, as the boy himself stepped from the obscurity of the little stable. "I came in to ask for a drink of water," he said to Mr. Sheldon. "I saw this door open and I—I thought if I could only sit down for a few ——" even talking seemed so much of an exertion that the boy swayed dizzily, and Mr. Sheldon's arm went around his shoulders.

"Daddy, we went in to feed the rabbits and we found him asleep on that pile of old carpet," Jim said quickly.

"Y-Yes, and when something woke him we—we gave him some bread and milk, and—and Jimsey got a cushion," added Connie in a quivering voice. "He was going to sleep there a while longer and then he—he was going on."

"They were dandy to me," the boy said simply.

Anne, full of sympathy, was sure she had never seen anyone look so tired. He was dressed well, but his suit was dusty and somewhat wrinkled, and bits of fluff from the old carpet flecked his wavy dark hair. In spite of his fatigue his eyes were full of determination, and he withdrew himself from Mr. Sheldon's arm as if about to start along.

"Look here, son, I know where there's a better bed than the one you had in there." Mr. Sheldon, who was naturally a big brother to all who were in trouble, took the boy's arm and turned him toward the house. "I should hate to have anyone go away from here looking as tired as you do, and when you've had a good sleep you can tell us what else we can do for you."

The boy gave him a quick, anxious look, and seemed to find in the kind face something entirely reassuring, for he was no longer on the defensive. "Thank you, sir," he said gratefully. "I shouldn't mind having a chance to sleep for awhile."

A half hour later, when the boy had had a bath and a cup of hot milk which he could scarcely keep awake long enough to drink, Daddy came downstairs to dinner.

"He's settled for a good, long night," he said in answer to the expectant group in the dining-room. "I think perhaps you'd better bunk on the sofa

in that room to-night, Ellis, in case he should wake."

"All right, sir," Ellis responded with alacrity. He was feeling tremendously cheerful, and just waiting for a chance to tell Anne what a wonderful piece of good luck in regard to lessons had come to him. "I wish I'd been home earlier; I'd have helped you with the boy, Dad."

"He's such a well-bred little chap he was no trouble at all. I'm afraid we're going to have trouble finding out who he is, though. The only time I asked anything definite he shut up like a clam and looked as stubborn as such a sleepy boy could." Daddy shook his head thoughtfully and seemed a little troubled. "I only hope that his mother and father aren't worrying, for it would be sheer inhumanity to try to question him to-night."

"He said he'd had toothache for two days and two nights and he hadn't slept a wink," Connie said, "and I asked him why his mother didn't take him to a dentist, and he said he hadn't any mother or father, but he'd been to a dentist about it. About the tooth, I mean." Connie, who seldom wept, was still somewhat shaken by her burst of tears. Down deep in her heart, however, she was satisfyingly conscious that the "something" which she had prophesied had happened.

"Daddy, I think," she went on, and then looked

anxiously at Rose, as if certain that what she was about to say would be received with scorn, "I think, and—and Jim thinks ——"

"Goodness! Do get another word in your vocabulary besides 'think,'" interrupted Rose.

"Well, I feel—I'm almost sure that he's an escaped prince, and that he can't go back to his kingdom for years and years."

"I bet you he can't either," Rose agreed with a laugh. "Connie, you do make up such yarns. You know you don't believe that."

"Well, perhaps I don't," Connie said with a sigh. "Anyway, I'd like to. And I do think he has a proud air, and when we found him asleep he was muttering something about a ship. Wasn't he, Jimsey?"

"Uh-huh. But that doesn't mean he's a prince," Jim objected.

"Well, we'll let him sleep as long as he can, and then, perhaps, he'll satisfy our curiosity," decreed Daddy. "I believe he's a nice boy, and I'm glad he's safely here."

It was an exceedingly quiet evening and night in the Sheldon household, though no one need have been afraid of disturbing the stranger, who slept as if his eyes had never known sleep before. The next morning Effie had trouble in keeping him awake long enough to take a little breakfast, and,

that done, he dropped back into slumber again. Then there was more food, and after that another long nap.

Early in the afternoon Anne, who had spent most of the day on guard, heard a cough and stepped inside the room to see if anything were wanted. To her relief, the boy was fully awake and looked at her with wide-open eyes, half-curious, half-anxious.

"How do you feel now?" she asked, trying to act as if it were the usual thing to have strange boys come to them in this way. "Are you ready for something to eat?"

"I *am* hungry," he confessed, and ten minutes later he looked really eager when Effie brought in a tray with a tempting lunch. He could scarcely wait to be helped into Ellis' bathgown and propped up with pillows. Anne, coming into the room again after awhile, found him finishing the last crumb, and took the tray away.

"Did it taste good?" she asked, sitting down in a chair near the bed. She was fervently hoping that now he would feel like telling something about himself.

"I should say it did. I haven't been able to eat much for the last day or two because my tooth's been so bad. And now I should like to know what time it is."

"Two o'clock."

"Two o'clock!" repeated the boy, unbelief in his voice. "Why, it was four when I struck this town."

"Yes, but that was yesterday."

"Well, what do you know about that?" This time he sounded so like a real boy that Anne laughed. "I must have my clothes and get out of here," he went on hurriedly. "It's awfully good of you to take care of me—I—I feel as if I'd seen you somewhere before."

"You did," Anne agreed promptly. "Yesterday—in our garden. Connie and Jim found you asleep in the stable, and I went out to see what they were doing, and then father came."

"Isn't it queer, I can't remember about all that? The last thing I've got clear in my head is seeing a door open and going in. After that it's like a lot of queer broken-up dreams."

"Well, there isn't so very much to remember. Daddy took you into the house and put you to bed, and since then you've slept and slept and slept."

"Staying awake two days and two nights makes a fellow go it pretty hard when he gets a chance," murmured the boy, and Anne fairly held her breath in her anxiety to hear more. "I wouldn't tell about my toothache at first, because I hated so to go to the

dentist. Then I went, and—well, I guess he's wondering where I am now."

"Did he expect you to come again?" Anne ventured.

"Sure. He treated it about ten o'clock the first time. I suppose it was yesterday, but it seems a week ago. Then he told me he'd have to look at it this morning, and he said he'd 'phone the school that I'd have to stay over night."

"Did your tooth get better after that?"

"Not for a long time. I went 'round to the house where the boys stay when they go down from school, and told them I wanted a room, but I couldn't eat any lunch, and the house was stuffy, and I had to get out-of-doors again."

"It must have been dreadful," Anne murmured with sympathy in her voice and eyes. She was hoping no one would come in to interrupt these revelations, and wishing that it would occur to him to tell his name.

"Then I went into a park and sat down, and my head began to feel queer and dizzy. And all at once I made up my mind that I never would go back to school, anyway—that I couldn't stand it any longer."

"I believe everyone in this family wanted to be out-of-doors yesterday," Anne said quickly. "It was the spring weather."

"Was that it? I thought it was because I don't get along well in school and because I've—I've made up my mind loads of times to run away." The boy dropped his voice and gazed at Anne gloomily. "Well, whatever it was, I took a train and came as far as my money would bring me—then I walked. I was going to try to get a place on a ship, but I didn't want to go off without taking a look at my—at someone I wanted to see."

"Someone here? Did you see him?" Anne's eagerness was so apparent that the boy looked startled.

"I couldn't find him," he said, ignoring her first question. "And by that time the pain in my tooth had stopped, and I thought I should go to sleep walking. Then I was passing your house—and you know the rest."

"And to-day I suppose you're in a hurry to get back to school—or even to see the dentist?" Anne ventured, quaking as she said it, for the boy's expression wasn't encouraging.

"I'm not going back," he said soberly. "I've stayed awake nights planning to get away—and now it's happened." His young face was sulky and determined. "There's no one to care," he added, "so you needn't look so horrified."

"Did I look that way? I suppose I was thinking how your"—Anne remembered just in time

what Connie had said about his mother and father—"your relatives would feel."

"They won't mind—much. They don't even think enough of me to write, except once in awhile."

"But they'd feel terribly if you should—should disappear. People mean to write letters, but they put it off or let it go altogether. I wrote a letter for Daddy yesterday that he'd been neglecting for a long time. And, not long ago, Archie Bradley, a friend of ours, said he'd treated his brother dreadfully. Why, he didn't even write to him on his birthday, and he seems very fond of him, too."

The boy's face flushed, and a queer smile hovered about his lips. "I suppose after he told you that he wrote often, didn't he?"

"I—I don't know," faltered Anne, suddenly shaken out of her calmness. She could not believe it, though she was as sure as if she had been told that this was Roger Bradley, Archie's brother.

"I didn't mean to give it away, but that slipped out. I suppose if you are a friend of Archie you can guess now who I am." The boy had been watching her telltale face.

"I—I suppose so." Anne was struggling with this new knowledge, and wishing for Archie or Ellis—most of all for father. Daddy had such a way of not being shocked at anything, and of making the right way seem the only reasonable one.

Just thinking of him gave her courage. "I can hardly believe it, though."

"Why not?" Roger challenged.

"Because it doesn't seem to me that anyone who—who belonged to your uncle and Archie would—would run away from anything." Anne got it all out finally, and then sat quaking over her own boldness.

Young Roger Bradley scowled and for a moment did not answer. Then he muttered sulkily, "That's all very well to say, but if you hadn't any home even in vacations, and you knew your uncle didn't care much for you, and you couldn't get on in school—well, perhaps you'd think you had a right to—to make your life different."

"Maybe I should," admitted Anne, trying to be fair like Daddy, and not think her own point of view the only one. "I can't say the idea of running away appeals to me, though." Unconsciously a hint of scorn crept into her voice, and the boy's face darkened.

"Haven't any use for quitters, have you?" he said.

"I ought to sympathize with them, for I should have been one myself if someone hadn't shown me how much better fun it is to brace up to my troubles." Only to her father had Anne ever told what Miss Graham had said to her, and it took courage

to say this to a strange boy, who would probably have no liking for the idea. The minute the words were out she regretted them, but nevertheless she felt impelled to go on. "Honestly, there's a kind of fascination about playing the game, and thinking out your next move, and trying to forget about yourself."

"I don't like games," the boy said with a complete lack of response. "And there's no one else to think about me, so, of course, I have to do it for myself. Archie and I are good pals when we're together, but that's mighty seldom. Uncle says I'm spoiled and—and a mollycoddle because my mother ——" he swallowed painfully, and turned his face away from Anne for a moment. Then, "Would you mind telling me where my clothes are?" he asked impatiently. "I ought not to have come to this town, anyway, but I thought perhaps I could catch a glimpse of Arch without his seeing me."

He was so cross one minute and so boyishly appealing the next that Anne began to feel like an older sister to him. It was foolish of him to think he could go far, for she should telephone Archie immediately. But suppose both he and Mr. Pearson should be away. It might be an hour or two before she could get word to them, and it was strictly against the doctor's orders to tell Mr. Brad-

ley anything that might disturb him. She stole a sly glance at the thin face with its unhappy eyes, and thought how dreadful it would be if Ellis or Jim should ever be so wretched.

"Oh, I wish you'd stay until my father comes home, and talk it over with him," she begged. "He likes boys and ——"

"No," interrupted Roger Bradley. "He'd tell me I ought to go back to school, and—and I won't go back."

"Very well," Anne said coolly. "I'll speak to Effie about your clothes. She's probably taken them downstairs to be cleaned." This last idea had occurred to her on the spur of the moment. Perhaps the clothes wouldn't be ready for him. At any rate, it would give her time to telephone to Archie before his brother could get started.

As she went through the dining-room she looked out of the window only to see Archie himself striding toward the house as if somebody were in pursuit of him. When she ran back to open the front door he began to talk excitedly, but in a low voice as though he were in the habit of repressing himself.

"Anne, may I use your 'phone? I've got to call long-distance. I've been at it over home, but Uncle's awake now, and if he gets hold of it there'll be the dickens of a mess."

"Yes, but first, Archie, won't you ——"

"It's Roger," he went on, scarcely realizing that she had spoken. "They've called up from school to know if he's here. I can't make out over the 'phone just what has happened nor how long he's been gone."

"Well, come upstairs—I want to show ——"

"Just let me 'phone first. Honestly, Anne, I'm scared to death for fear something's happened to the kid." There was real distress in his eyes, and this time he paused long enough to let Anne get in a word.

"Nothing worse than that he's upstairs in bed, in our guest-room," she explained, a little disappointed because she could not plan a meeting according to her own ideas.

"Oh, the young chump!" exclaimed Archie, distress changing to indignation. "I'll go up and give him a piece of my mind—I'll ——" he was striding toward the stairs, but Anne took possession of the lowest one, arms stretched from baluster to wall.

"Not until you look pleasanter and promise to be patient," she said valiantly. "He's been kept awake by toothache, and he thinks no one cares for him, and you don't write to him—you told me that yourself. And, besides, I've talked to him till I've got on his nerves."

For an instant Archie frowned at her as though questioning her right to decide how he should treat his own brother. Then his face cleared. "I'll be so good and patient you wouldn't know me. I guess maybe I'm the chump, after all," he said with such convincing honesty that Anne stood aside at once.

"He's pretty stub-firm," she called after him softly; "prepare yourself for a hard time," but he was going up the stairs so fast that apparently he did not hear her.

Ten minutes later Archie found his way to the kitchen, where Anne was waiting while Effie darned a last hole in the socks she had washed.

"He wasn't so stub-firm as you seemed to think," he remarked with a grin. "What had you been saying to him, anyway? He took my breath away by deciding almost at once that it was up to him to go back to school and begin over again."

"I never shall tell," murmured Anne, wondering if anything she had said could possibly have hit the mark.

"He actually wanted to go and tell Uncle all about it, so that everything would be straightened out," Archie went on. "I had hard work persuading him that the doctor would give us Hail Columbia if we did that. Now I'm going to get

the car and take him back to school. I've got to put Pearson wise, so that he'll make it all right with Uncle. Fortunately, I've been planning to drive in town some day."

Anne, waiting in the living-room for Archie's return, heard Roger coming slowly downstairs, and went to the door to meet him.

"Come in here and we can see the automobile from the window. Effie's putting up a lunch for you, because Archie says it's a long drive." Anne was leading the way and talking fast in order to put the boy at his ease, but when she paused for lack of something to say, she realized that he was only waiting politely for a chance to speak.

"You've all been dandy to me, and I want to thank you," he said. "I should like to see your father again, and your sister—the one who found me asleep. If I had a sister I should—should want her to be just like you."

"Oh!" Anne was actually startled. She had been so sure that he had Connie in mind.

"I wish you were my sister," Roger Bradley went on with wistful frankness, "because then you'd write me all about Uncle and Archie, and—and this family."

His interest in her family was so evidently a concession to politeness that Anne smiled. "Perhaps even without being your sister I might write to you

sometimes if Daddy agrees," she responded willingly.

"I'll write and ask him, shall I? And then you can answer. It makes me feel lots less homesick to think about it." His face had flushed and he was really eager. "Archie means well, but the most he usually says is that he'll write a longer letter next time. And Uncle always wants to know if I appreciate my advantages and whether I'm making the most of them."

There was a gleam of mirth in the sombre eyes and Anne laughed. "Men and boys hate to write letters," she said excusingly. "Oh, here comes Archie!"

"All ready, kid. Now, Roger, I'll take Anne for my witness that I promise you I'll do my best to get Uncle to let us spend the summer together—without a tutor—unless we can have Peachy Pearson, who's the best pal ever."

"Good for you. Anne, will you write me how Archie gets by with it?" demanded Roger with an audacity that made his brother gasp. "Oh, I didn't mean to be fresh," he went on penitently, "but—you know what we said before." The old wistfulness, the boyish appeal, had come back into his voice and eyes, and Anne nodded understandingly.

"Look here, kid," Archie put in before Anne

could speak, " it's time to go; you're getting light-headed." He pulled his brother through the doorway, then turned for a last word. " I'll come in tomorrow and give you his last messages," he said, and Anne saw him put his arm around Roger's shoulders as they went out to the car.

CHAPTER XVII

THE NEXT MOVE

ANNE had a blue silk scarf tied about her head and was just finishing dusting the living-room when Roberta came in.

"Ugh! It's cold," she said with a shiver. "We have hardly had a sunny day since that warm one back in March."

"You mean the day spring began," Anne laughed. "Connie says winter just hid around the corner to fool us and then came back again."

"I don't like to wear winter clothes half-way through April. By the way, did you notice anything this morning?" Miss Bobby's eyes were eager.

Anne surveyed her critically. "I've seen that hat before—and the dress—and the ——"

"Oh, I don't mean clothes," Miss Bobby interrupted with scorn. "I think you're very unobserving. I—I walked over—alone—without even a cane!"

"Dear me! I wish I'd been looking out of the

window. I should have cheered you on. The street isn't very smooth yet, either."

"I should say not. I crossed gullies and mountains. By the time I got to the end of our driveway I was wild to go back, but pride and the thought of you made me keep on."

"Of me!" Anne put a final touch on the piano, and went to the window to shake her cloth. "Why, Bobby Brent, I haven't said a word to you about exercising since you told me I mustn't."

"I know it," Miss Bobby responded coolly, "but you've made it perfectly plain in a dozen other ways. There have been moments this winter, Anne Sheldon, when I haven't liked you a little bit, but this morning I do. I have dandy times with Rose, but you're the friend of my heart, oh, Anne of my Delight."

"Sit down immediately and play 'Oh, Moon of my Delight,'" commanded Anne. "Why did you make me remember it when I'm so busy? You know I love to shut my eyes and listen."

"Clever child! You don't like to have me say nice things about you to your face, do you?" Roberta sat down at the piano, ran her fingers over the keys, played a few chords, and then jumped up again restlessly. "I don't feel like playing. I'd rather talk. Tell me, has Archie ever persuaded his uncle to agree to his summer plan?"

"Well, he didn't exactly promise, but Archie's quite sure he will," Anne answered doubtfully. "He wrote his brother about it, and Roger's perfectly happy, and says he thinks of it all the time he's walking off his punishment for running away."

"Well, I certainly do hope that old uncle won't be disappointing. What makes him so unkind to Roger? He must be a very disagreeable man."

"I've only met him once, but I liked him," said Anne, seeing in a flash, as she often did, the stern, almost sad face and the piercing dark eyes. "I'm shaking in my shoes, for Archie says his uncle means to set a day very soon for me to call on him."

"Poor you." Miss Bobby, who never sat still very long, had wandered over to the piano again and was absently turning over the music. "Oh, does Rose play this?" she questioned, and forthwith began an enticing melody with a swing that set Anne's feet in motion. For a moment she kept on dusting, but even her hands felt the music, and presently she snatched the blue scarf from her head. It wasn't big and shimmering like those the girls used at school, but it would do.

At first Roberta played the notes that were before her, then with a skilful modulation she began to improvise. Anne felt the change and let her imagination lead her where it would. She was a dryad who had slipped out of her tree in the forest.

The ground was soft with moss and starred with flowers. Through the network of branches the sunlight sifted down, and there were patches of sky, deep-blue against the tracery of green. In fancy she slipped from tree to tree to call her sister dryads, while the music sang, "Come out; come out and play." There was a note of alarm—someone was pursuing her—the dryad was frightened—she held the veil before her face and ran—crouching——

Miss Bobby stopped playing with a laugh and a crash, as Anne's last run brought her nearly to the doorway, where Archie stood smiling.

"Somebody left the door unlatched, so I walked right in without stopping to buy a ticket," he said. "I knew Roberta could tickle the ivories, but jingo! I didn't suppose you could do anything of this kind, Anne."

"Oh, I can't. I used to watch the girls at school, but I just make it up as I go along."

"I have her do it, because she needs exercise," Miss Bobby said coolly. "I'm so helpful to my friends in all those little ways."

"That's supposed to be a hit on me, but it's not deserved." Anne's eyes were sparkling, and her hair stood out like a shining halo. "I leave it to you, Archie, if I've ever tried to reform you."

"Of course not. You knew I didn't need it. I

wish to goodness you could influence my family, though." The tone in which he ended was deep with gloom.

"Why, what ——" began Anne.

"It's just the funny little things you don't expect that make the most trouble," Archie went on in a discouraged voice. "Uncle never looks at the house bills, but this morning the telephone bill got in among his letters, and for some uncanny reason he remembered that he hadn't had any long distance calls with the place where the school is. Of course, he guessed right away that it had something to do with Roger, and he wormed the rest of it out of me. He's furious over it all, and the worst of it is he's taken back what he said about this summer. I just can't bear to write to the kid about it."

"Don't write to him yet. Perhaps your uncle will change his mind when he has time to think it over," urged Anne.

"You don't know him."

"Well, I'd just like to have a chance to tell him what I think of him," stormed Roberta, her black eyes snapping. "It isn't fair to be so nice to one nephew and so horrid to"—something in Archie's expression made her pause—"well, of course, he's your uncle and I suppose you like him, but I—oh, goodness, stop me somebody." She threw herself on the couch and dug her face into a cushion, as if

that were the only way to subdue her rebellious tongue.

"He is my uncle and I do like him," Archie said soberly. "And, really, underneath everything, he's very fond of Roger, but he's got a fixed idea that the poor kid must be toughened, and that the way to do it is to be severe. I suppose you can't blame him so much when he's been tied to his bed and chair for nearly three months."

"Of course not," Anne murmured. Her mind was centered on poor Roger, and she was wondering what he would do when he heard the disappointing news.

"By the way, Anne," Archie remarked unexpectedly, "last evening Uncle said he'd be glad to see you any afternoon this week between two and three."

"I—I suppose I'd better wait till he—he gets over this," faltered Anne. "Don't you think so?"

"Oh, my goodness, no," volunteered Miss Bobby, coming out of her cushion with a bounce. "Strike him while the iron's hot—nip him in the bud—take him by the forelock—that doesn't sound right, but never mind—do all the things those old proverbs say. I just wish I had your chance. I'd—there I go again—it's me for the cushion ——" but this time she silenced herself by pressing both hands on

her mouth, and from over this barrier she looked at them with eyes brimful of mischief and mutiny.

"But it isn't my place to try to tell a grown-up man what he ought to do," objected Anne, stiffening a little. "I should probably only make matters a lot worse."

"Oh, Anne of my Delight, tell him all about it just as you did me," persisted the incorrigible Bobby. "You almost made me weep describing that homesick boy, so unhappy that he planned and planned to run away, then suffering and—and sleepless——" Miss Bobby was watching her audience with a critical eye and talking in what she flattered herself was a deep, sad voice. "I think it was awfully touching, too, that he wanted to have a look at Archie even if he couldn't speak to him."

At this point Archie walked hastily over to the window and stared so fixedly at a woman passing that she bowed under the impression he was Ellis. "Hang it all!" he muttered, without turning around, "I've got to do something to make Uncle change his mind."

"Of course you have," Roberta assented cheerfully. "You'll never forgive yourself if you don't. There might be—serious consequences. I wonder if you remembered to say to your uncle that—that your brother wanted to tell him all about this before

he went back to school, and that you wouldn't let him."

"Great Scott! I didn't, and that would have made a hit with Uncle. I suppose it's too late now for it to have any effect." Archie turned from the window with a very sober face and walked toward the door. "I've got to do something," he repeated helplessly, "but I'll be jiggered if I know what it is."

"It'll come to you," averred Miss Bobby. By this time she had persuaded herself that she was persisting in this wholly from unselfish motives and not from a desire to tease. "And Anne must help, because, next to you, she knows more about it than anyone else."

Anne came out of her long silence with a start. "What would you do if you were in my place?" she demanded, turning suddenly upon Roberta.

"Why, I—well, it's different with me. You have heaps of influence in your little quiet way, only you don't seem to know it. You can prove it by me. No one ever made me even try to walk better till you happened into my life. And I warned you that you mustn't—and you didn't—but you did—oh, dear, I'm going to cry, and I'm being perfectly ridiculous—but I mean it all the same, and if you two things don't do something ——" the excitable Miss Bobby was almost on the verge of tears. She

got up from the couch and pinned on her hat with vicious jabs of the hatpins. "Anne, I'm going home. You're such a disappointment to me," she murmured, and then fiercely hugged her friend as though to palliate the words. An instant later she looked back at them from the doorway. "Anne, I dare you," she said vehemently, and the door clicked behind her.

"Whew! Some little cyclone!" Archie muttered, as he watched the progress of the slight figure across the street. "If I'd had any sense I'd have gone along with her."

"I think she wanted to try it alone this morning," Anne answered, and then rather shakily—"You must think it's strange for me to tell your affairs to my neighbors, but she's the only one and—and it just happened to come out."

"I don't mind having her know. Only I wish she didn't think Uncle is such a brute. Probably when she meets him she'll change her mind." Archie was still staring reflectively out of the window at Roberta as she went up her own steps and into the house. Then he turned a perplexed face to Anne. "She's like a gnat, isn't she? Just keeps at you till she makes you do something. But how on earth am I going to know what to do?"

Anne was as puzzled as he was. It was impossible for her to believe, as Roberta did, that she

could have any influence with Mr. Bradley. To be sure, once she had felt quite at her ease with him, but then he was well and busy, and now he had been ill for months, and even Archie seemed to be a little afraid of him. Besides, this was their business and not hers, and she was certain it wasn't her place to interfere. And having so wisely made up her mind, she unmade it again the next minute by remembering how lonesome Roger had seemed.

"Let's not write to Roger about it until we've had time to think it over," she said, with so much the air of being in it to the finish, that Archie looked at her gratefully. "Perhaps father might be able to suggest something. Of course I don't feel Bobby's right at all in thinking I could do anything."

"Well, I don't know," Archie answered surprisingly. "I'm not sure that you couldn't. Uncle took quite a fancy to you—and he really wants to see you. But if you don't want to do it—anyway, I won't write to my kid brother for a day or two.

"I must tell him about it soon, though," he went on before she could answer, "because he's making too many plans. In the letter that came yesterday he wrote, 'Find out where the Sheldons are going this summer, Archie, and we'll go to the same place.' He's a cheeky kid, all right."

"It would be fine, but we don't go away," Anne said with a little sigh. "We're most too big a family to travel much, and Daddy hasn't taken a real vacation for some time."

"Well, it doesn't look as though young Roger and I are likely to be together. It's too early to make plans, anyway. That kid's got an awful imagination when he gets started."

"Some of the rest of us have. Rose hasn't any patience with Connie and me. I'm glad Roger likes the Sheldon family, for I liked him."

"Likes you! I should say he did. If he didn't after the way you've treated him, I'd—I'd cuff him."

"That would make him fond of us, surely," laughed Anne. And then, with great seriousness, "Have you thought yet of any new way to persuade your uncle? I hoped that if we talked about something else, perhaps a brilliant idea would come to you."

"Not an idea—much less a brilliant one." Archie looked very sober. "Shall I tell Uncle you'll come over soon? You know we've got a nice jolly old housekeeper now—a real story-book one with a black silk apron—and you can ask for her if Pearson and I don't come running out to meet you."

"You told me her name is Mrs. Dee, didn't

you?" Anne asked, and then, "Don't think that means I'm really coming," she went on hastily, "for I'm just plain scared even to think of it."

"Well, you'd better not come to-day, anyway," Archie said soothingly, "because Pearson and I are going to be away between two and three."

"As I'm not coming to call upon you I don't see what difference that makes." Anne tried to feel as spirited as her words sounded, but it was a wretched failure. "Oh, dear, don't think I'm a perfect coward. Miss Bobby would probably sweep in and say something funny to your uncle, and before he knew it he'd be ready to do what she wanted, but I'm not that kind of a girl." There was real discouragement in her voice, and Archie came to the rescue at once.

"Oh, fudge, and a couple of tuts! Uncle and I like your kind of a girl," he averred. "He's said so a dozen times since the historic day when first we met. And let me tell you one thing, Miss Anne Sheldon. I'd never think any girl was a coward who could stick to a job she didn't particularly like the way you have this winter."

"How do you know anything about it?" queried Anne blankly.

"I was introduced to a neighbor of yours the other day and—and I thought she'd never get tired talking about you."

"Oh, Mrs. Parkes."

"The same. Now look here, Anne, I've got to chase myself home, and don't you worry one minute about Roger or calling on Uncle. If you feel like it I hope you'll come some afternoon, and probably he won't mention Roger."

"All right. I daresay I shall get up my courage." Anne tried to sound more optimistic than she felt. She did not have much time to think about it, though, for, as Archie went out, Susan came in with a matter of vast importance on her mind.

"Anne! Anne!" she called with a little break in her voice, "I—I've got a stick of wood in my finger."

"Oh, Honey, let me see it. How did it happen?"

"It didn't happen. A boy pushed me on purpose 'cause I—I said he was a—a sissy. An' I hit a post and made this bump on my head, and got a stick of wood in my finger."

"Did you cry?" asked Anne, knowing that a bump of that size must have hurt.

"Naw." Susan drawled it out disdainfully. "Why would I cry for a boy? Won't you please take out that wood? I want to go out on the sidewalk and wait till he goes home."

There was such a threat in Susan's voice that

Anne felt the immediate need of light on this present problem, and for the moment forgot the troubles of her neighbors.

"I think Effie'll take out the splinter for you," she said, shrinking from the task of hurting still more the small hand stretched out for her inspection.

"Effie's getting lunch. 'Sides, I want you. Your hands are nice and soft, and—and you look as if it must hurt a nawful lot. 'Sides all that, you're my bluvedest sister, Anne."

"Really, Susan?" Anne could scarcely believe her ears, for commendation from Susan was rare. This, indeed, was a reward for the many times she had tried to keep good-tempered and patient.

"Sure. Anyway, to-day I mean. And I promise I won't cry."

In the face of such courage, Anne could no longer hesitate, and without another word of protest, she cleaned the little hand, and picked and probed as skilfully as she could.

"If it had been my nuther hand I'd have tooken it out myself," Susan remarked with a catch of her breath, when Anne's needle went especially deep. "I like to take out splinters. Sometime I'm going to be a doctor and wash out people's ears, and pick out all their splinters."

"I would," murmured Anne. And then, "Here it comes. Mercy! What a big piece. I don't wonder you called it a stick of wood. Let's take it and put it in the fireplace, and then we'll tell Daddy what a hero you were."

This done to her satisfaction, Susan started for the front door. "You haven't seen Hibbie Jenkins go by, have you?" she demanded with a gleam in her eye which boded ill for Hibbie.

"I haven't been looking out. Let's go upstairs now and put something on that bump of yours to keep it from growing bigger."

"I don't care how big it gets," Susan responded recklessly. "And, anyway, I told Hibbie I'd see to him when he went home. You wouldn't want me to break my promise, would you?"

"Yes, when it's such a bad one as that. And, look here, Susan, if you're going to be a doctor and mend up people, and take out their splinters, and—and make them think you're very wonderful, you mustn't begin now by bumping and slapping them." Anne looked at her small sister soberly, and the latter, halted in her purpose by this new view of the case, turned unconsciously toward the stairs under the guidance of Anne's arm.

"Besides, we'll have to hurry to get ready for lunch, and Effie's got the kind of soup you like, and another nice surprise for you and Jimsey."

"Good-by, Hibbie," Susan said explosively, and started upstairs on the run. Then she stopped and went slowly, even limping a little, as though she felt some concession were due her injuries.

At half-past one, Susan being safely at play in the garden with her chum, and the other children on their way back to school, Anne's mind jumped back to the affairs of the Bradley family.

"I believe I'll get dressed—just as if I really meant to go—and then see what happens," she said to herself, as she departed to her own room after wiping dishes for Effie. Perhaps it would be especially good to go when she knew Archie was to be away, because then Mr. Bradley would be sure it was a call just for him.

Luckily it was a cool day, and she could still wear the blue velveteen suit, even if spring had come. There was something particularly soothing to her feelings in that shade of blue, she decided, when she reached the point of settling the jaunty hat on her shining hair. She felt calmer now, really almost sure of herself, and not so afraid that when she got nearly there she should scurry around some corner and give up her purpose.

"I wonder if I'll remind him of Alice Bell with my hair done up?" she asked herself. "Perhaps if I do that will make him soft-hearted; and then something may suggest Roger, and—whatever shall

I say if he does talk about Roger? Oh, my goodness, I don't believe I can make myself go!"

All in a moment she was in such a panicky state of mind that her hands went up to take out her hatpins, but the sound of the door-bell made her pause to listen. Probably it was the postman. Then Effie called her, and she ran part of the way downstairs to reach over the balusters for a letter. It was from Roger—an answer to the first one she had written him.

"DEAR ANNE:" it began.

"Your letter sounded just like you—like the way you talk, I mean, and for a long time after I read it I felt that I must be a good boy and mind my big sister. That feeling wears off, though, so you'll have to write again soon. I hope you don't mind being adopted, because you really can't help it, can you?

"Isn't Uncle a peach even to say *perhaps* Arch and I may have the summer together. When he says as much as that I think it's pretty sure. I lie awake nights planning what we shall do.

"Thank you for writing so much about Archie. Do it some more, please. I'm afraid my letters won't be worth much to you, but I'll be awfully glad to get yours. The next time I'm at your house I hope I shall see Rose. From what you write she must be some girl.

"With kindest regards to your family,

"Yours sincerely,

"ROGER BRADLEY.

"P. S.—When you were talking to me that day you mentioned a game, and said it was fun to think up your moves. I can't seem to remember clearly about it. Is it a game I could buy? Won't you tell me about it again, please? "R. B."

Anne had retreated to her room with her letter, and now, after reading it twice through, she sprang to her feet.

"I've got to go—there's no way out of it," she said aloud. "He can't sleep nights for planning about next summer, and something's got to happen to make that dream come true." She gave a final tug to her hat, hunted up her prettiest handkerchief, slipped into the trim little coat. "He wants to know about my game and the moves," her mind ran on. "My goodness, Anne Sheldon, you came mighty near not knowing your own next move when you saw it."

She ran downstairs, stopped to ask Effie if there were any errands, and then paused on the front porch to finish putting on her gloves.

Across the street Miss Bobby, wrapped like a cocoon in a steamer-chair on the piazza, stared in amazement at the figure in blue on the Sheldon porch. Then, with unbelief in her voice, she called, "Don't tell me that you're really going."

"I am," answered Anne in a surprisingly loud and decided voice, and went, half-running, out of reach of further remarks.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PROFESSIONAL CHEERER

Approaching the house, Anne decided that it must be the doctor whose machine was just starting away, and she had a hopeful moment of feeling that perhaps Mr. Bradley would not see her after all. It would be easy for her to make that an excuse for not even inquiring, she told herself, but the spirit of determination, aroused by Roger's letter, led her firmly up the walk instead of past it, and the next moment she was ringing the bell.

She had called there one evening in the early spring with her father to inquire for Mr. Bradley, so she was prepared for the long dark parlor, with its high ceilings and gloomy hangings, into which she was ushered by the man who opened the door. She would not have believed, however, that it could seem so different merely because she was alone, and she sat there feeling very shaky, and almost, but not quite, wishing she had not come. Ancestral portraits, belonging to the owners of the house, emerged from the gloom to stare at her with a why-

have-you-come-here air, and she was conscious of being particularly held in disfavor by a thin-faced, sharp-eyed man who might easily have been mistaken for an ancestor of Mr. Bradley himself.

It was a great relief, therefore, when she heard the patter of short steps in the far end of the room, and, directly, a plump, little woman with rosy cheeks and smiling eyes came into view. She had on a soft silk gown which made no sound, a small black silk apron edged with lace, and snowy fichu and cuffs. At once Anne agreed with Archie that the new housekeeper was a story-book sort of person.

"Miss Sheldon, Thomas should have put you in the morning-room. This is enough to give anyone the shivers," she said, and at the sound of her voice, Anne had the feeling that the room was several degrees lighter. "I'm so glad you came to-day, for when Mr. Bradley makes up his mind to anything, he wants it to happen right away."

"I wasn't sure you would know who I am, Mrs. Dee," Anne answered, already less shy, and even, for some unaccountable reason, rather pleased with herself.

"Yes, indeed, I do. Mr. Archie has told me about your family, and only this morning Mr. Bradley was talking of the day when you christened his ship for him."

"Was he really? Oh, that makes me feel much better. You see I haven't seen him since then, and I—well, I suppose you can see that I'm a little scared."

"I can't see anything of the kind," Mrs. Dee affirmed. And then with a comfortable gurgle that made Anne want to laugh, too, "I wouldn't see it if I could. I'm Irish, my dear, and my old grandmother said the fairies danced around my cradle, so, of course, I'm obliged to look on the bright side."

"Oh, Connie should hear you say that," Anne cried delightedly. "She'd just love anyone who can speak of fairies as if they were real."

"And who can prove they aren't?" demanded Mrs. Dee with a toss of her head as she led the way down the long room. "Come on, my dear; Mr. Bradley's nurse is off duty for two hours, and I must be within call."

Anne followed with the spirit of adventure growing in her heart. She was curious as to what would happen next, and she flung off the last of her fear, as she slyly shook her fist in passing at the long-faced ancestor, whose eyes followed her grimly.

At a sunshiny window in the upstairs hall Anne was stationed while Mrs. Dee went in to prepare Mr. Bradley for his caller. Left alone, she almost lost her newly-found courage, for she could hear a querulous voice that held no hint of familiarity,

and she wondered if Archie's uncle had changed his mind and did not want to see her. She was just deciding that she should not consider this a misfortune, when the thought of Roger popped into her head, and she clutched at her vanishing courage. Even if she couldn't say anything about Roger today, perhaps this call would pave the way for a future one. She tried to plan what she should say first.

"Now I'll be right here with my sewing, and if Mr. Bradley wants anything please call me." Mrs. Dee came over to the window where Anne was sitting. "You've come at a good time," she added in a lower tone. "Something the doctor said has put him in a bad humor, and he needs cheering."

Anne drew a quick breath and looked with longing at the stairs. "Perhaps—perhaps I'd better go home and come another day," she said appealingly.

"I shouldn't have told you that—I was thinking only of the poor gentleman," Mrs. Dee apologized with her twinkling smile. "He won't be cross to you, my dear." And then with a look and emphasis that called back Anne's fleeting courage, "Maybe this is the very time you can do most for him."

Anne had her doubts about that, but she was ashamed to hesitate a moment longer, and once inside the pleasant sitting-room, she forgot every-

thing except sympathy for the man who sat in the long chair, looking so pale and ill. It was the smile she remembered that greeted her; a smile that softened the stern face inexpressibly, and, as it had before, took away her shyness.

"O-ho! Where's the long braid of—of auburn hair?" he said the first thing. "That was what reminded me most of my little Alice Bell. You haven't forgotten her?" he ended anxiously.

"Indeed I haven't. How could I—especially with my darling watch to look at?" Anne pulled back her sleeve to show him her treasure.

"So you like it, do you? And it keeps good time? Well, well, that's a marvel. I gave the other girl something—I can't remember what—but I didn't tell her about Alice Bell."

"I'm glad you didn't," Anne said shyly. "It's nice to think I have a—a sort of secret with you."

"I like that, too." The sharp eyes softened and the smile came again. "But truly I miss that long braid of yours. I'm fond of that color."

"You needn't mind calling it red; it really is, you know," Anne answered with a resignation that surprised him into a chuckle. "I had to do it up, because it got in my way when I was doing housework and cooking. And then I'm old enough; I'm sixteen. Rose thinks I ought to act older than I do."

"Rose is the sister I haven't seen," said Mr. Bradley, showing an unexpected knowledge of the family. "But how does it happen that you're not in school instead of doing housework?"

"Well, you see, the doctor kept me out of school this winter. And I'm the oldest girl, and Daddy needed someone to help out."

"So you buckled down to the work, eh? You're a good girl, and I like you for it. And did the others fall into line and mind what sister said?"

"Well——" Anne hesitated, then looked at him with an amused and confiding smile. "I suppose you know they didn't without my telling you," she said simply. "There were days—there still are days—when I feel that I'm just the misfittest person that ever was. Then—something nice happens, or Daddy seems 'specially pleased with me, and I just start all over again."

"Good for you. What do the sisters and brothers think about it now?"

"Sometimes—I'm not exactly sure—but I think that they really do feel that I'm—oh, I don't know how to say it." Anne stopped helplessly, and then tried again. "I believe perhaps I've made a place for myself in the family," she said, her eyes growing thoughtful. And then, in sudden surprise, "Why, that's what Miss Graham said I must do, but it never occurred to me that I'd done it. But

they do come to me for nearly everything now. Why, only this morning Susan insisted that I must take out a splinter for her, and if you knew Susan you'd understand ——" Anne paused, flushed and excited over what she considered a victory.

"And who's Miss Graham? One of your teachers?" Mr. Bradley could not understand why his guest should seem so gratified over being asked to take out a splinter, but all this was an agreeable change from the monotony of his days, and he was mildly interested. "I want to know what there is about that lady to make you look so pleased."

"I—I was really thinking out loud just then. I've never told anyone but father how it all happened," Anne answered hesitatingly. "It's quite a long story. I'm afraid I shall tire you."

"Please tell me," urged Mr. Bradley.

Anne did not know which would be harder—to tell or to refuse, so without more question she gathered her courage and plunged into the recital. And as she talked, it seemed to her that she could stand aside from it all and see herself as she really was on that October day when Jean Graham first appeared to her, and unconsciously she made so vivid a picture of that forlorn Anne Sheldon and the stranger who helped her that her listener changed from lukewarm interest to eagerness.

"By George! that girl hit it just right," he burst

out as Anne paused. "And we can't often see far ahead on our moves, either. If you'd lived the kind of a life I have you'd know that. It's been a great game, and I've got into some awful corners."

"I suppose we'd never get over being pushed into a corner sometimes," Anne said simply, quite relieved at having her story meet with such a response. "And for me, it's awfully hard to tell what my next move ought to be."

"Of course. That would be hard for anyone." Mr. Bradley gazed at her thoughtfully, and Anne wished it were her place to tell what she believed his next move very suitably might be.

"My doctor was pitching into me just before you came," he went on with an air of annoyance. "He says it's up to me now if I want to be cured; I've got to stop thinking about business, and I must follow his directions or else he can't do anything more for me." His voice was so irritable that Anne's heart sank. Evidently he had gone back to the state of mind in which she had found him.

"Doctors are that way," she sympathized. "My doctor thought I was the only one who could do anything for myself."

"Well, I've been a very sick man. I'm a sick man still, and he needn't think he can make me responsible for winning the game nor for the moves I make."

"You don't have to win the game all at once—it's just one move at a time," Anne ventured. "And it was my Miss Graham who talked about that, and not your doctor."

"What's that? Why, so it was. And I quite liked the idea when it was applied to someone else." He smiled, but his face grew sober again. "I suppose"—there was a deep sigh—"I suppose I'd better decide on my best move and make it promptly. I'm a cross old man, Miss Anne; please forgive me, and tell me more about your interesting family."

A note of weariness in his voice struck Anne's ear, making her feel that she was tiring him and that she must bring her call to an end. Before she could say anything, however, the man who had opened the door for her came into the room with a message for Mr. Bradley.

Anne turned away and found herself looking directly at a photograph which stood on a table near her. It was of two children, and at once she knew the older one to be Archie, slender, straight, and evidently a responsible young person even at that age, for his arm protected the younger boy, and his expression was serious. Of course the other must be Roger, but could that plump, laughing child, whose face fairly radiated happiness, have changed into the pale, almost sad-looking boy whom she had

seen? She was so intent upon the picture that she did not know the butler had departed until Mr. Bradley's voice recalled her.

"Looks like Archie even now, doesn't it, and he was only seven when that was taken?"

Something held Anne's mind for the hundredth part of a second and asked an unanswerable question: Why shouldn't she speak of Roger herself? "I guessed right away it was Archie," she said in a voice that sounded queer to her own ears, "but I never should have imagined that Roger could look so well and happy as this."

"Eh, what? How does he look, then?" A minute before Mr. Bradley had intended to ignore the presence of Roger in the photograph. He did not wish to talk to this girl about his younger nephew. He liked her, he wanted this call to be wholly pleasant, and he was afraid they might disagree. But Anne's first remark had startled him, and when she hesitated a moment before answering he repeated his question sharply. "What do you mean about his looks? Eh?"

"He's thin and pale, and his eyes have an unhappy look—almost a sad one." Anne was watching him anxiously. To her own surprise, she was not worried as to what he might say to her, but she was very much afraid she should make him worse. She glanced toward the door, half-expecting Mrs.

Dee to come in and hurry her away. In spite of her anxiety, however, she hoped desperately that nothing would happen until she should have a chance to say a little more.

"Humph!" grunted Mr. Bradley, bearing up wonderfully under her unexpected attack to her great relief. "Archie didn't tell me his brother was looking poorly."

"Archie didn't see him at his worst. Besides, I don't believe boys and men notice those things so much."

"Humph!" said Mr. Bradley again, giving her a straight look before which she did not falter. "What's the matter with the boy, anyway? He's in a good school with plenty of people to take care of him. He has enough to eat and wear, and, for a boy of his age, plenty of pocket-money. I don't see ——"

"Yes, but he's homesick," Anne interrupted involuntarily. "He wants to be with someone who belongs to him for part of the year, anyway." Without knowing it, she had a sort of mother look in her eyes which carried Mr. Bradley back to the days when little Alice Bell used to tie up his cut fingers, and unconsciously his face softened.

"I believe he'd like school better if he didn't think he'd have to spend the summer with a tutor—if he knew he could be somewhere with Archie,"

Anne went on, feeling that now she had begun she must not stop until she had done all she could. "I'm sure he'd like to be with you, too, only he's afraid you don't want him."

"You see, Archie's always been my boy," Mr. Bradley said in a voice so gentle that Anne's heart grew lighter. "He's been with me ever since his father died, and he's got used to jumping about the country with me and suiting his ways to my ways. But Roger—well, he was his mother's baby, and she spoiled him."

"Last October someone said that Aunt Lucia had spoiled me more than any of the others," Anne said pensively.

"So you started in to make 'em prove it, eh?" Mr. Bradley's face was so much pleasanter that Anne was beginning to like to look at him again. "But I'm afraid Roger hasn't the same amount of perseverance you have."

"Probably I shouldn't have stuck to it if I hadn't had so many to help me." Anne was regarding him with thoughtful eyes. "It took father and Miss Graham to start me, and Mrs. Parkes pulled me out of holes and gave me great pushes along the way as soon as I had sense enough to let her. Best of all, there was always Daddy; he made me feel that I could do so much more than I thought I could. That's why I'm most sorry for Roger

—because he hasn't anyone to help him that way."

"If his father had lived he would have known how to look out for his boys," Mr. Bradley murmured, avoiding Anne's clear gaze. "I'm not a bit of good with ——" he paused, and stared out of the window until Anne began to feel nervous. Then, with a quick turn of the head, his piercing eyes held hers. "Look here, young person," he said, "I've an idea. Let's thresh it out together.

"I didn't tell you what the doctor called his best prescription for me, because at first I wouldn't listen to it," he went on quickly. "He said that if I would take a sea-voyage—keep on the water for a month at least—he could almost guarantee that I should get rid of this rheumatism."

Anne looked at him expectantly. Her imagination had gone instantly to work, but her good sense kept her from saying anything.

"It just occurs to me that about a week from now a certain ship you and I know is going to reach port in this country."

"The 'Alice Bell,'" Anne murmured, with a soft lingering on the name that fell pleasantly on Mr. Bradley's ears.

"That's the one. Now how would it be if I should take Pearson and Archie"—he paused an instant, and anxiety was plainly written on Anne's

face—" and Roger, of course, and start off on the 'Alice Bell'? She's going to the Azores next, I believe, and perhaps I could leave my rheumatism there, and come home feeling a little younger than I do now."

"And the boys could have lessons with Mr. Pearson," said Anne, to whom studying was still among the most desired things of life.

" Oh, I suppose so," Mr. Bradley said indifferently. No one would have dreamed that a few hours earlier he had fumed and scolded because Roger didn't appreciate his school. " I really think it is more important to make Roger strong again than to have lessons, don't you? " He spoke as if the welfare of his younger nephew had always been his chief consideration, and Anne felt almost rebuked for seeming to put books before health.

" I think it's a perfectly beautiful plan," she answered with deep conviction. " I couldn't have thought of one half so good. Roger won't mind so much about the summer if he can have this, I should think."

" Oh, probably the summer plan can be arranged, too," Mr. Bradley said hastily. " I have some land down in Maine where I'm going to build as soon as I get 'round to it. Near where I used to live. Perhaps I'll let Pearson and the boys go down there this summer if I get my health back by that time.

As a matter of fact, I feel better already, now that I've got something new to plan for. What's your fee, young lady, for cheering a man and working magic like this?"

Anne laughed and flushed. "I haven't done anything; it's all your own plan. Roger will be so excited now that he won't sleep at all, I'm afraid."

"We'll soon fix that—we'll fix that," rumbled Roger's uncle. "Now that you've told me that the boy isn't well it puts quite a different face on the matter. Of course, under those circumstances, he couldn't be expected to like school and ——"

"Your masseur has come, sir," interrupted Mrs. Dee's pleasant voice as she looked in from the hall.

Anne jumped up quickly. "Oh, I must have been here a whole hour," she said. "I beg your pardon for staying so long."

"I hope it seemed only a few minutes to you, as it did to me, my dear." Mr. Bradley's hand held Anne's in a friendly grasp. Then, with a meaning glance, he said softly, "If I get in a corner I shall send for you."

Going downstairs with Mrs. Dee, Anne glanced at her watch and was shocked to find that it was almost four. "Oh, why did you let me stay so long?" she asked. "I hated to look at my watch

"I HOPE IT SEEMED ONLY A FEW MINUTES TO YOU"

while he was talking, but if you had said only a word I ——"

"I knew you were doing him good," Mrs. Dee put in calmly. "I should have spoken long ago if I hadn't been sure of that. Mr. Bradley has reached the stage where he needs to be encouraged —even irritated into helping himself."

"Well, I'm afraid I irritated him. I only hope he won't change his mind about Roger."

"He won't." Mrs. Dee was holding the door open for Anne, and her face wore an expression of gentle firmness. "You've put through just what the doctor left me to manage, and I shan't let go of the advantage you've gained.

"You see," she went on after a thoughtful moment, "Mr. Bradley doesn't know that the doctor sent me here—that I'm part of his treatment."

Anne's surprised and questioning face made her smile. "Yes," she continued, "I've worked for this specialist for several years, and he sends me usually to just such cases as this, where persons are down for the first time in their lives and don't know how to get up. I'm a sort of—of professional cheerer," Mrs. Dee ended with eyes that laughed. "But you mustn't betray me, my dear, for it would spoil it all if Mr. Bradley knew I was anything but the housekeeper."

"I won't," Anne promised. "Now I know why I felt better the moment I saw you."

The professional cheerer laughed and put out her plump, pretty hand. "Good-by, and thank you for coming. You seem to have a way of making people do what you want."

"Oh, dear me, I didn't do anything," Anne flung back as she went down the steps, and she really believed what she said. As she walked on toward home, she was thinking how easily it had all come about. Now it seemed to her absurd to have been afraid, and to have hesitated about going. That was always the way: when she walked straight up and faced a trouble it was almost sure to disappear; or, at least to grow less. But then, so far, her troubles hadn't been big ones. She wondered if she should have courage to face them if they were.

Nearly at the house, she saw Archie and Mr. Pearson returning in the big car, and she waved her hand gaily, and hoped someone would tell Archie as soon as possible the good news about Roger. Then her attention was distracted by the sight of Susan and Jimsey racing to meet her, and the next moment she caught a glimpse of someone who came to the front door and out on the porch. It looked like father—a second glance assured her that it was Daddy, but why should he be home so

early? Anne hastened her steps to meet the hurrying children.

"Now you let me tell, Jimsey Sheldon. It's my turn." Susan pressed her dirty hands tightly over Jim's mouth, to his great disgust.

"Huh! We don't know much of anything to tell," spluttered Jimsey, releasing himself with a vigorous twist. "It's only that ——"

"It's only that ——" screamed Susan, drowning out her brother's voice.

Anne turned a little pale, and looked appealingly at her father, who was coming quickly down the walk.

"Come into the house, Anne-Honey," he said reassuringly. "I've had a letter, and I came home early to tell you about it."

CHAPTER XIX

THE STEERING-GEAR

ONCE inside the house, Mr. Sheldon turned the expectant children out-of-doors again. "By and by you shall hear all about it," he said in a way that gave them no chance to protest. "It's Anne's story first." And then he helped Anne take off her coat, and they went into the living-room together, closing the door.

"Nannie, this is something that will make you feel both sorry and glad," he said tenderly, and Anne, keenly interested in what was to come, nevertheless forgot it for an instant, in deciding that Daddy was looking thin and pale, and that some way must be found to make him take a vacation.

"This morning I got a letter from Cousin Tom Merrill, Aunt Serena's son," father continued quietly, "and in it was enclosed an—an unfinished note for you, Anne."

"For me? From Aunt Serena? I wondered if she would ever answer that letter I wrote her." Anne took the note and exclaimed over the handwriting so wonderful for an old lady.

"DEAR ANNE:" she read aloud.

"Your letter brought real sunshine to me, and you gave me such a clear picture of your family I feel I know you all.

"I am glad you remember my house and the garden. You didn't seem much taller than the currant-bushes when you were here. Tell Ellis I particularly recall the hen named Katawkut, because she always managed to get into the garden and scratch up my pet flower-seeds."

After this the letter went on in pencil and the writing was tremulous and indistinct.

"Three weeks ago I began this letter, Anne, dear, and since then I've been so ill I never expected to finish it. Now I'm thankful to be better, and I'm propped up in bed trying to think of something besides my poor old self.

"What you wrote about loving this house of mine touched and pleased me very much. My son has made his home so far away I had thought no one would care about the old house, and I had about decided to leave it to this little town for whatever use it might be needed.

"But your letter and my illness have made me feel otherwise, and yesterday my lawyer drew up a ——"

Anne looked up at her father with innocent, disappointed eyes. "Is this all? What made her

stop just there?" she asked, without a glimmer of the real truth.

"Why, darling, just then Aunt Serena must have slipped away from this world, for the nurse, who had left the room for a moment, found her with the pencil still in her hand."

Anne stared uncomprehendingly for an instant, and then threw her arms about her father's neck and cried. She had hoped that sometime she should see Daddy's aunt again and learn to know her, but it was not for this she wept. All she could think of was father, and the sudden fear that he might slip away and leave her. Unconsciously her arms tightened about his neck.

"Darling, you're pretty nearly squeezing the breath out of me," he said apologetically. "I didn't know you cared for Aunt Serena so much."

"It w-was such a sweet l-letter." Anne lifted her head and wiped her eyes. Then the sight of Daddy's face, flushed, because he had been hugged so hard, but smiling, nearly sent her into tears again.

"Daddy, darling, are you sure you feel quite well?" she implored. "Don't you think you could take a vacation now, instead of waiting till summer?"

"I'll be lucky if I get one then," he answered, and then understanding her real distress, "I'm as

strong as an ox, Anne-Honey. If those headaches would stop, and I could sleep better I'd be as fine as a fiddle."

"Such a big 'if,'" murmured Anne unsteadily.

"Now read Cousin Tom's letter," Daddy went on, "and you'll find out what dear little Aunt Serena meant to say to you."

Anne read it once and then, without a word, went slowly through it again. "Wh-what does it mean, Daddy?" she asked, lifting puzzled eyes to her father. "I—I seem to be a little dazed."

"It means that in the will Aunt Serena made the day before she died, she left you her house and the land about it, and also two thousand dollars. She told the lawyer that the money would help you to get the education you want to have."

Anne stared at him dumbly. Then, "W-would you m-mind saying that over again?" she said unbelievingly.

Mr. Sheldon smiled and repeated his statement slowly. "Cousin Tom thinks it will be all right for you to sell the property if you choose, and that, with the two thousand dollars, will give you a college fund, Nan."

"Oh, Daddy! College! Do you think I really might plan for it? Wasn't it dear of Aunt Serena to think about my education? But imagine me owning a house! I can't bear to think of selling it.

Wouldn't it be fun if we could live in it one summer? Does the furniture belong to me, too?"

"Everything, except two or three old pieces which Cousin Tom is to keep," answered Mr. Sheldon, consulting the letter again. "But it's in a little bit of a town, and I can't see Rose and Ellis liking to stay there. And I could only be with you for a short vacation."

"Then it wouldn't do at all," Anne decided. "But, anyway, I can own it for a little while, and when it is sold I shall have college to think of. Oh, Daddy, did you ever want to do anything so much as I want to go to college?"

"I'm sure I have." Daddy was smiling, but there was a look in his face which Anne did not understand.

"It seemed to me last October when I had to give up school as if I never could be happy again," she said, "and now there's a chance of going to college. Even without that," she added honestly, "I wouldn't give up for anything the things I've learned at home this year."

"Good for you," father said in that warmly approving way which always cheered Anne's soul. "You've been a trump, Nan, and ——" A knock on the door interrupted him, and almost before he could speak, Rose entered, followed by Ellis.

"Do you mind if we come in, Daddy, to hear

what you two are plotting?" Rose demanded, going to sit on the arm of her father's chair. "The children are out on the doorstep looking like little owls, and Susan says there's 'a nawful secret' about Anne. Aren't you going to tell us, if we'll be good?"

"Aunt Serena has left Anne her house and two thousand dollars," said father, handing Ellis the letters, and then he put his head back against the chair, and sat there looking very tired, Anne thought.

"I wanted to live there for one summer," Anne confessed after the exciting news had been thoroughly talked over, "but Daddy thought it wouldn't work."

"I should say not," came from Rose and Ellis in one breath, and the latter went on with, "Catch me burying myself in a little town like that unless I'm obliged to."

"None of that for me," agreed Rose with a shudder. "Let's not even talk about it. Say, Nancy, how does it feel to be an heiress? If someone should leave me some money I'd have a smock like the one I saw to-day."

"I don't believe I realize yet that I am one," Anne admitted, and just then Connie came to tell them that dinner was almost ready.

After that it seemed to Anne that something in-

teresting was happening all the time. The next day Archie rushed in to talk over his uncle's plans for a voyage on the "Alice Bell."

"I've always wanted Uncle to do something of the kind," he said with enthusiasm, "but he's never thought he could get away from business long enough to have a good time. And now, between the doctor and you, Anne, it's settled. And that corking old Mrs. Dee won't let Uncle weaken for a minute; she just keeps him chirked up, I can tell you. Mr. Pearson's writing to the school about it to-day, and I'd give a fortune to see Roger when he hears the news."

After Archie's raptures were over, Anne told her story. "Ellis says I'm a landed proprietor, whatever that may mean," she ended shyly.

"Brookfield!" Archie repeated the name of the town. "That sounds familiar to me. I bet that's somewhere within a hundred miles of the place where Uncle was born. If we go there this summer, I'll look up your property, Anne, and tell you what you'd better do with it."

"Ahem!" murmured Rose. "Why don't you put out your shingle—'Archibald Bradley, Jr.—Land-Agent—houses and gardens supplied on short notice.'"

"Or a lovely picture of your smiling face," suggested Ellis, "and the touching words—'See me

when you want a farm. You'll never be disappointed.' "

"No one who sees me is ever disappointed," retorted Archie blandly. "Keep on with your trifling jests. You can't either of you prove, though, that I may not sell that place for Anne some day. Well, I'm off again. I thought I was going to be the only pebble on the beach this morning, but Anne's so excited over her news that she hardly listened to mine."

"I did, too," retorted Anne. "I'm just as happy as I can be about it."

"Sounds as if she was glad to get rid of you," Ellis remarked gloomily, "but you can just bet I'm not. I shall miss those afternoon study hours with Mr. Pearson like the dickens."

"Oh, you can probably get another tutor," Archie responded, with an air that made it seem the easiest thing in the world. "Though I will say there are not many like him. He and I are going up with the car Saturday to get Roger. Want to come along, Ellis?"

"Sure thing," and presently the boys walked off together, leaving Anne to think over what had not occurred to her before—that Ellis would be chief loser in this shuffling about of plans.

The next excitement was the arrival of Roger. Anne had seen him tired and sad, sulky and defiant,

but, until now, she had not seen him happy, and with the happiness came a charm felt by everyone from his uncle to Susan. To Connie and Jim there was an added fascination in the fact that he was their discovery, and they fairly haunted his footsteps in their out-of-school hours.

The day before the Bradleys went away, Roger came in by himself to say good-by, and for the first time during his short visit found Anne alone.

"I'm sort of dazed," he confessed. "I can't believe that I'm I, and that Uncle's himself, and that we're all going on a voyage together. Uncle says I owe my part of it to you, and I think you're a wonder-worker."

"He likes to say so, but it's really his plan," Anne said in all sincerity. "Only—perhaps—it might not have happened quite so soon."

"I believe you," Roger answered with a tightening of his lips. "Anyway, Uncle's perfectly dandy to me just now." He looked out of the window thoughtfully and then his eyes brightened. "Say, Sister Anne, you've never explained to me what it was you said about a game when I was here before. Please do it now," he coaxed.

Anne was shyly reluctant, but seeing no immediate chance of an interruption, plunged into an account, as brief as she could make it, of her first interview with Miss Graham.

"That's not such a bad idea," Roger said promptly. "I should probably take a header, though, across the whole board, and not stop to think whether I was making the right move or not. If I try it will you take an interest in my game? I want somebody to care whether I do things, and to be glad when—when I succeed." There was a wistfulness in his voice, a longing in his eyes which went straight to Anne's heart.

"Of course I'll take an interest," Anne promised, "and you may be perfectly sure that there's someone in this family who'll be awfully pleased when you succeed."

"And you don't mind if I call you Sister Anne? It sounds kind of homey, you know, and as if I really had a sister."

"I quite like it," Anne assured him. "If you're bad I shall call you Bluebeard."

"Ouch! I don't like that. You'll have to think up some better name than that ——"

"Or else you'll have to be good and not deserve it," interrupted Anne.

Roger laughed. "You have me there, but I think you'd better hunt up another name, all the same. I believe I'll try your game, though. I'm going to play straight for the king-row. Perhaps I'll beat you to it," he ended under his breath, as Connie and Jim appeared in the doorway.

After the Bradleys had departed, life settled down into apparent monotony for the next two weeks, but for some reason Anne had a queer certainty that more excitement was on the way. She deliberately let her mind play with all pleasant possibilities, such as a call from Jean Graham, or the choice of a college for herself, in order to avoid thinking about the one subject that really worried her—which was father. For Anne it was something new to have Daddy come home almost every night so pale and listless that even Susan felt his weariness; to see him jump nervously at sudden noises; to know that his hands were often cold and sometimes trembled. When she once or twice tried to speak about it he was impatient, almost irritable, and that was the most un-Daddyish thing possible.

At the end of a fortnight, which to Anne had seemed a month, came a Saturday when father was so late in getting home to lunch that the children had eaten theirs, and were gathered on the porch waiting for him. It was one of those warm days which come sometimes in May, making that usually gentle month seem like midsummer, and no one felt energetic.

"I don't see why father's so late," Anne said worriedly. "He always telephones if ——"

"Probably someone invited him to go automobiling, and he hasn't had a chance yet to 'phone,"

Rose answered, with that severe good sense of hers which always made her sister feel a little guilty. "There! What did I tell you?" she went on triumphantly, as an approaching car drew up at the curb, and they could all see Daddy sitting beside the gentleman who was driving.

"Why, it's my doctor," cried Anne, jumping up in a hurry.

As the two men got out, Mr. Sheldon was smiling, but he waved his hand as though he were shaking something he was not responsible for, and his face was very pale. Without a word, Ellis was down the walk in three strides and had his father by the arm.

"Here's a nice family-party," said father's doctor-chum, reaching the porch and shaking hands with everyone. "This is something good for any man to come home to. Your Daddy and I lunched together, children, and as I was driving out this way I brought him home.

"No, thank you, I can't stay," he went on in response to Anne's eager invitation. "I say, Curly"—this was father's old nickname among his friends—"how about letting me own two or three of these youngsters? Suppose I take Anne and one of these boys and—and another girl ——"

"Nothing small about you," interrupted Mr. Sheldon. "I can't spare one of them." His voice

shook a little in spite of his evident effort to be the same as usual.

"Daddy, what makes your voice sound funny?" asked Susan, getting hold of her father's hand and gazing at him anxiously.

"Your Daddy's tired, and he wishes I'd go off and let him alone," answered the doctor, smiling amiably at his friend. "Anne, when he tells you what I've been saying to him you'll understand why he thinks I don't know what I'm talking about. I daresay there was a time when you didn't have much faith in me, but, by George, if your Daddy will only be such a fine patient as you have been, he'll be well in six months. Now I must go. Make him tell you all about it, children. It's up to you, Curly," and the doctor was down the path and in his car before anyone could say a word.

Mr. Sheldon could not help smiling at the six expectant faces when he turned to go into the house. "What a pity that I'm not going to tell you some joyful secret instead of a very unpleasant fact," he said, as they all followed him into the living-room. "That miserable doctor-man says that I've got to take a rest from work, and that if I don't do as he orders, right away, he won't be able to mend up my machinery at all."

Daddy spoke playfully, but there was a look in his eyes that brought home to the three older chil-

dren something of what it meant when a man had to stay away from the work which made it possible for him to take care of his family. It was a relief to all of them when Connie in her happiest way broke the silence that followed.

"In that case, Daddy," she said, beaming on him as if the most joyous thing in the world had happened, "in that case, I think we can have the grandest garden we've ever had, and if you'll come out in the yard with me, I believe I can give you a few ideas on the subject."

"Goodness, child, give him a chance to rest," Rose said quickly, but father laughed at Connie's speech, and somehow it cleared the atmosphere and made things easier.

"At first the doctor said I must go away from you all and stay for a long time," Daddy went on slowly, quite as if he were trying to make it all clear to himself as well as to them, "but I soon made him see that was an impossibility. Then he ordered me to find some place, far enough away from business so that I could forget it, and where I could take the whole family if I insisted."

"Why, Daddy, I call that a pleasant secret," Rose put in quickly. "I think it would be fun to go to some hotel where we could climb mountains and play tennis. You could try golf if you liked it better."

"Fall off your high horse, Rose, unless you can get off quicker some other way," Ellis said impatiently. "What do you suppose it would cost to take this whole family to the mountains?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I'd like something else just as well. Anything for a change."

"Oh, Daddy," Anne began, with the light of a wonderful idea in her eyes, but Connie, quite forgetting her usual politeness, interrupted. "Let's have a gypsy wagon," she said excitedly, "and tents, and sleep out at night, and learn all about the stars."

"Don't, don't," begged Susan, burying her head under her father's arm. "I'm afraid of squiggly bugs—and—and lelephunts."

"That settles the plan. I'm afraid my nerves wouldn't stand lelephunts," answered Daddy, trying to smile, but looking so tired that Anne's heart sank.

"If I could only get a chance to speak," she said quickly. "My feelings are hurt. What's the matter with my house? I'm sure——" She stopped, because her father was gazing at her so queerly.

"Why, Anne," he said in a dazed way, "why, Anne, you've had it such a short time that I'd forgotten you own it. It—it would seem like home to me almost from the first. I—I believe I could get well there."

"Of course you could. And there'll be the garden to work in, and we can have a cow and hens. I don't care how much housework I have to do, and we'll all help about the garden——" Anne stopped for breath and looked imploringly at Rose and Ellis. If they'd only say something to help; something to make father forget what they had said when they first heard about the little house in the small town.

A sudden color flamed in Rose's face. "I—I'm going to be a farmerette," she announced. "I'll drive the oxen and horses, and—and learn how to run all the machinery. And I'll raise a crop of—of something." She swallowed hard and stared out of the window for an instant. When she looked at Daddy this afternoon it seemed to her that she really saw him for the first time in her life, and that there was nothing she wouldn't do for him.

"I think it's a great plan. You can count on me," Ellis said, rousing himself from an absorbed moment in which he had silently renounced the diploma which of late had seemed so desirable. In him, too, the sight of his father, pale and shaken, had awakened stronger feelings than any he had known before. "For goodness' sake, what are you doing, Jim?" he added, thinking that to change the subject would be good for all of them.

Jimsey, in his favorite attitude on the floor, a

sheet of paper before him and a pencil in his hand, did not even look up. "I'm drawing a plan for a new henhouse," he observed calmly. "I thought proba'ly Anne's wouldn't be up-to-date."

Often a plan so quickly decided upon is discarded almost as soon, but this one became more desirable as the days went by. As Connie said, everything seemed to come their way. The doctor was for hurrying them off at the earliest possible moment. Mrs. Parkes, who had been away, shortened her visit to come home and help Anne. The high-school principal said that, if they would do some extra work this summer, Rose might have her promotion, and Ellis would stand a strong chance of winning his diploma. Effie, to whom they feared they must say good-by, insisted upon going with them; which was great luck, for Effie had been brought up on a farm. Roberta wept over the idea of their departure, offered to lend them anything she owned, and assured them she should come to see them whether she was invited or not. But it was Mr. Darling who capped the climax by producing friends who wanted to rent the Sheldon house for four months.

Anne could see that this piece of good fortune made her father much more cheerful, and at dinner that night he seemed quite like his old self.

"Well, Nannie, the Sheldon Six is to change into a touring-car in a few days, isn't it?" he said gaily. "It's a shame it isn't a real one."

"What do you mean by Sheldon Six?" questioned Jim, pausing with his spoon in air.

"Oh, I forgot. That was a secret, wasn't it, Nan? You don't mind now, of course. You see, Jimsey, some time ago Anne and I decided that we were all a part of the family machine, and that I was the chauffeur."

"And what was Anne?" demanded Rose curiously.

"I was the steering-gear. Oh, you may laugh if you want. I know it's funny to think of me steering anything." Anne blushed, and busied herself with Susan.

"I'm not sure I think there's anything funny about it," Rose answered with a contemplative stare at her sister's bent head. "And now I know why you were so pleased when Archie called me an accelerator."

"I remember," laughed Anne. "You looked at me as if you thought I was crazy. And I couldn't explain, because it would have sounded so foolish. Yes, you're the accelerator, and Con's the carburetor; which isn't a pretty name, Connie, darling, but very important."

"What am I?" inquired Ellis.

"Oh, we didn't find names for all," Anne hastened to explain. "Daddy, why don't you let Ellis be chauffeur this summer, and you be the gentleman owner who sits still and enjoys the landscape?"

"Anything you say," agreed father. "What will you be, Susan?"

"Squawker," answered Susan promptly. "You know, 'Ah-oo-ah-oo-ah-oo ——'" She would have gone on indefinitely if she had not been repressed.

"Well, you don't make that noise unless the chauffeur tells you," warned Ellis. "And if I'm to be chauffeur ——" He left her to guess what would happen, and turned to his brother. "What's your part going to be, kid?"

Jimsey, who had evidently been considering the matter, glanced around the table with eyes full of laughter. Then, with a chuckle, he slipped out of his seat and linked his arm in his father's. "I'm going to be—I'm going to be the gentleman friend of the gentleman owner," he said with deliberation.

"Good for you," applauded Connie. "We're all going to be that—I mean we're all going to be the lady friends—well, never mind what I mean—I'm so excited, because Daddy says p'r'aps I may have a little pig. Anyway, I don't know what my part of the machine does, but I'm willing to do it, and I think the names are all very appropriate, 'specially Anne's."

"Same here," muttered Ellis, speaking in Anne's ear as they all went out of the dining-room. "Steering-gear is all right for you, Nan. I know now that you steered me into lessons with Mr. Pearson. Archie gave it away; he can't get over what you did for Roger. And, believe me, I'm going to get my diploma."

"Of course you are—but those things just happened. Anyway, the steering-gear has to respond to the driver, and I had the best kind of a chauffeur all winter." They had stopped by themselves in the hall, and Anne faced him squarely. "That means we've got to work together this summer, Ellis."

The boyish face grew sober. "I hadn't begun to think about my part of it. I'm afraid I shan't be much good—but I'll try. And I guess the gentleman owner will stand behind us."

"Yes," Anne agreed happily. "We've got that to be thankful for."

After this came days when it seemed to Anne that everyone in the family was likely to want her at the same moment, and in widely separated parts of the house. She tried hard to keep her head steady and her voice pleasant, but it was a weary Anne who crept off to bed the evening before the journey. To-night she was to share Rose's bed, and, too tired to go to sleep, she lay there listening

to sounds in the room below. Father had said that he must finish clearing his desk, and she could hear him pulling out the drawers, and walking over to the fireplace occasionally.

The memory of the night of months ago when she had lain awake and listened came into her mind, and with it the desire to be sure that father was not getting too tired, and to say good-night to him once more before she went to sleep. She thrust her feet into slippers, put on the old blue wrapper—it had been left out to give away—and went downstairs fleetly, not with the curious holding-back of the former time.

"Daddy, darling, haven't you almost finished?" she asked, walking over to the desk. "I'm afraid you'll be too tired to sleep."

"The last drawer is empty." He was wiping it out as he spoke, and now he went over to the fireplace to deposit the last scraps.

There was a note of weary discouragement in his voice which made Anne long to comfort him, and she stood there, slim and straight in her blue gown, wishing with all her heart that she could think of the right thing to say.

"I'm going to bed now, dear," he went on, and then his glance fell on her, and he whistled softly. "You've reproduced the picture, haven't you? Same girl—only a little stouter—same hair—same

robe. But there's a difference, Nan—a big difference. I believe it's in the eyes."

"Nicer color?" suggested Anne hopefully.

Her father laughed, and his weariness seemed partly to vanish. "I could almost say that they're a trifle deeper in color," he murmured, studying her face critically. "At any rate, they're deeper and steadier of purpose, and not so clouded by self-distrust as they were before. You've gained courage this winter, girl."

"Yes. I'm not so much afraid now. I've found out that if I walk straight up to my troubles they're likely to vanish."

Daddy looked at her queerly for an instant. Then he put out the light and they started toward the door together. "I believe I'll study your methods," he said thoughtfully. "I've been watching and listening these last few days, and I've made up my mind that if anyone's absolutely important in the family car it's the steering-gear. Do you realize how much we all depend on you, Nan?"

"I'm glad," Anne said simply. "Daddy, playing Miss Graham's game made last winter a lot more interesting to me, and the best part of it is that it doesn't come to an end. It's almost like having an adventure every day. And, after all, I'm not near the king-row yet. There are plenty of chances to be cornered, and plenty of wrong moves to

make." They were standing in the hall now and the light fell full on her eager, sensitive face and shining eyes. "Daddy, darling," she went on with a mischievous smile, "now that you have let out our secret—now that they know that I've dared to try to steer them—it's up to me, more than ever, to watch my game."